

**DAMNED IF I DO, AND DAMNED IF I DON'T:
AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHICAL KNOTTY AFFAIR ABOUT LIVING WITH, AND
LEAVING MALE PARTNER VIOLENCE**

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The Degree of Master of Education in the
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ABSTRACT

Male partner violence involves repeated abuse, committed by an intimate partner, someone you know and care about, over a period of time. A woman who has experienced this unimaginable betrayal by her intimate partner, the man she believed would protect and cherish her, struggles with the many complexities involved in male partner violence. I use autoethnography as methodology to share my own personal story of male partner violence and I explore, examine, and challenge the socio-cultural and socio-political norms that influenced me to stay in an abusive relationship and also leave the relationship. I include the knottiness of my healing journey after moving out and moving on. I use a silkscreen portrayal of male partner violence, a pen and ink self-portrait, photographs, poetry, court documents and journal entries to explore different perspectives of my experience and to examine the relationship between seeing, thinking, and knowing, and the complex nature of my experience of male partner violence. I struggle and untangle what kept me in the marriage for so long and share the stimulus for why I eventually left and I examine the very troubling effects of male partner violence on myself and my children. I share my guilt, shame, grief and loss but I also recognize my resourcefulness, strength, and determination to survive and move beyond male partner violence. I made many decisions along the way and I always felt caught in a losing dichotomy every time. Through a feminist way of viewing male partner violence and autoethnographic writing, I also examine social perceptions of male partner violence, domination, the loss of voice and power that occurs and the lack of support from traditional social institutions. While I understand that women experience male partner violence in different ways, this is my personal experience of living with and leaving male partner violence.

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* * *

People say, "What is the sense of our small effort?" They cannot see that we must lay one brick at a time, take one step at a time.

Dorothy Day, 1897-1980

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis . . .

To all the women and children who have experienced male partner violence.

To all who work collaboratively with women, children, and men
move past the trauma of male partner violence.

* * *

To my three daughters . . . I love you now, always, and forever. Your love, acceptance, and trust
in me continue to inspire me beyond measure. It is a privilege to be your mom.

* * *

To my sisters and brother for believing in me . . . I love you and I thank-you.

To family, extended family, and friends who were there with me through the tough times and
persevered with me, I love and appreciate you more than you know.

* * *

To my partner, I value your love, support, and unwavering encouragement over the course of this
tumultuous thesis journey.

* * *

To my mother and father I will be forever grateful for your unconditional love, I miss you.

* * *

“Face your deficiencies and acknowledge them; but do not let them master you. Let them
teach you patience, sweetness, insight. When we do the best we can, we never know what
miracle is wrought in our life, or in the life of another.”

Helen Keller, 1919-1985

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CHAPTER 1: Muse

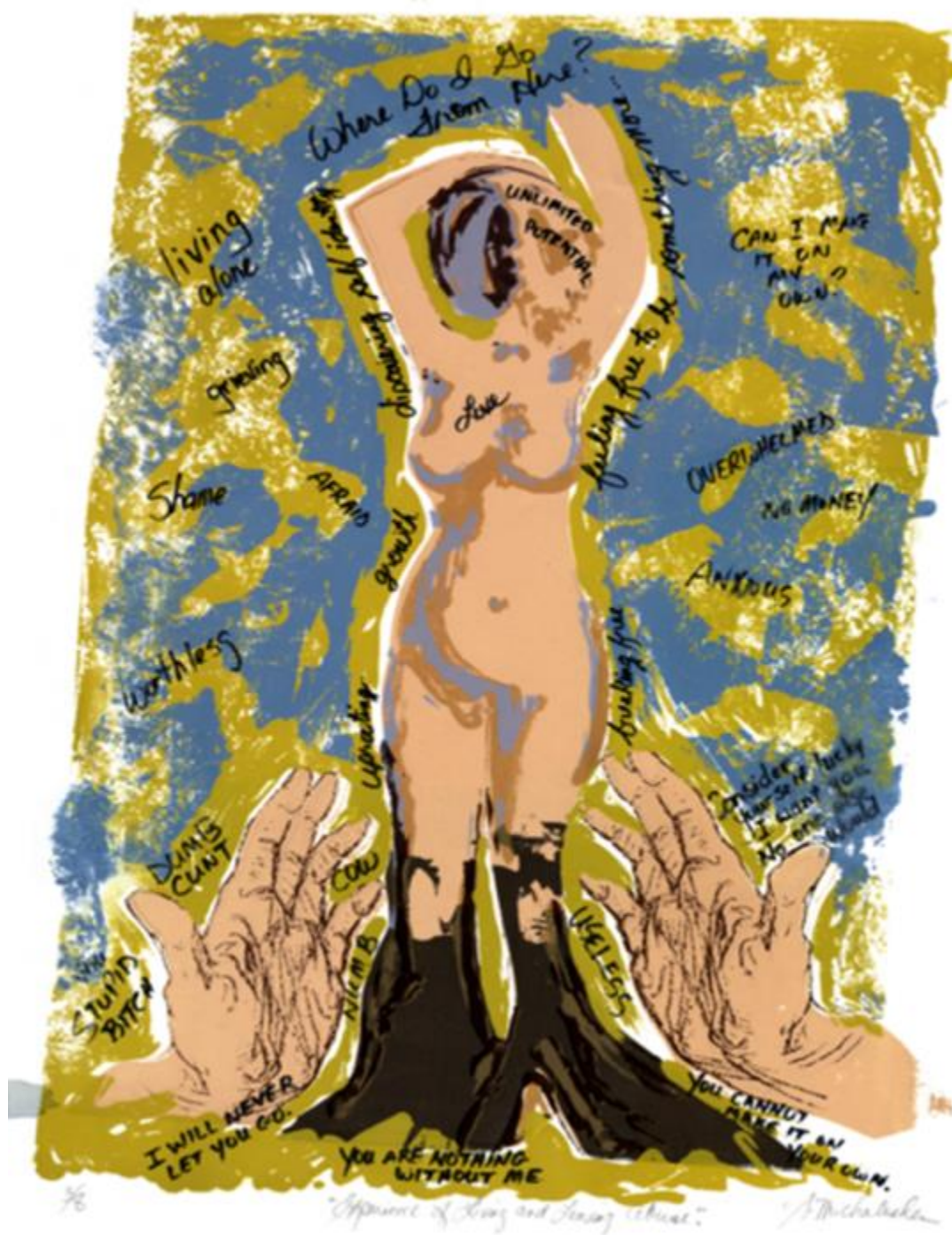


Figure 1: "Experience of Living and Leaving Abuse." 2002.

Silkscreen on paper 3/8. 30½ x 23¼" (77.47 x 59.05). Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.

“Create something personal and meaningful,” my art professor instructs me upon examining my latest print depicting a Precious Moments figurine. Unlike my classmates who were creating original pieces of art, I had been satisfied with replicating existing artwork because I lacked confidence in my own artistic ability. “I think I can create something meaningful,” I muse.

I am continually amazed and inspired as I gaze around the printmaking workshop at the artwork my classmates are creating. As I think about what would be personally meaningful, I decide to create a silkscreen depicting my experiences of living with and leaving abuse. Four years have passed since I left my marriage and I feel willing and able to illustrate this tumultuous chapter of my life. Multiple images flood my mind. Of these images I choose to include the following three in the print: masculine hands, a tree, and a nude female form. The masculine hands are pulling me back to my unhealthy marriage; a tree represents growth, continual transformation, and my rootedness in values regarding commitment to marriage; and in the centre, a female nude form, blossoming, yet still connected to her roots. Similar to a lenticular print where the picture changes as the image is viewed from different angles, the female appears to be lodged in thick brown mud or sticky tar. From one angle she appears stuck but from another angle she seems to be aspiring to break free. A push-pull tug-of-war is created between a growth to become something more and desire to remain embedded in the comfort of familiarity.

I also choose to include words and phrases in the print that represent my experience of living in an abusive marriage and reflect the fears I faced when leaving and moving on with my life alone. So many words and phrases whirl around in my head. It’s like gazing into a kaleidoscope of my life: violence, questions, doubts, self-blame, and fear twirling together and

eventually transforming to hope, inspiration, and self-worth. Sitting in front of my easel feeling panicked and overwhelmed, I rest my head in my hands, my heart racing as I frantically search for the words to best describe the horror from this chapter of my life. Some words resonate strongly as I begin to grasp at the ones that best fit. I highlight the importance of each word or phrase in the silkscreen by putting them in bold and using handwriting or capital letters: **YOU ARE NOTHING WITHOUT ME; YOU CANNOT MAKE IT ON YOUR OWN; I WILL NEVER LET YOU GO; Consider yourself lucky I want you. No-one else would; and USELESS.** Like a jellyfish wrapping its tentacles around my heart, the sting of these words continue to linger and torment my soul, such debilitating words like **COW, STUPID BITCH, and DUMB CUNT.** Words like **worthless, Shame, AFRAID, ANXIOUS, OVERWHELMED, NUMB,** and **grieving** represent the emotions that cripple me and leave me weak. Questions and fears that kept me captive in a loveless marriage for so long are represented by the phrases: **CAN I MAKE IT ON MY OWN? NO MONEY, living alone, and Where Do I Go From Here?** I ask myself, Can I really use such intimately personal thoughts? Is there a purpose for all this rumination? Then words flood my soul like a cool drink refreshing me with the courage to conquer my fears, persist, and move forward with my life, words like **uprooting, breaking free, growth, feeling free to be something more . . . , discovering self-identity, UNLIMITED POTENTIAL,** and **Love.**

As I wrestle with making sense of these words and images, I wonder how I can I put everything together. I recognize that my drawing skills are rudimentary, so I look for images to copy as I continue to arrange and then rearrange them. I wonder if my idea is too personal for an art class. I question my rationale for creating this piece and yet I feel such a passion for the work as I fit the pieces together. I conclude that this represents my life. My life is meaningful!

I continue contemplating colours for each of the pieces and decide on life-like representations for the male hands and the female form. I decide that the woman (who represents the ideal me) will remain faceless. When others view my print I satirically joke, “That’s what I used to look like before I put on all this weight,” but I continue silently in my thoughts, feeling diminished. In place of facial features I create a mask to represent all women who have experienced male partner violence as well as the persona representing this difficult time in my life. The mask is mostly amethyst with dark brown streaks, creating borders and depicting phases while giving this cover a sense of dimension. I also use amethyst streaks to highlight the feminine aspects of the woman’s body and her curves. Amethyst is a strong yet soft shade of purple, which I think separates the other colours. Amethyst is comprised of blue, green, and red. The woman’s pink skin and the man’s hands are a shade of red, as is the brown tree and the outlines of the hands. It’s as if these three colours come together and separate to reveal the image on the paper.

I feel challenged to create a background that will adequately represent this tumultuous time in my life. Blue is the colour of the sky and has always been a favourite colour of mine, so a deeper muted blue becomes the dominant part of the background. A modest blue infused with purple tones denotes a majestic aspect to the print. Green seems appropriate to represent growth and renewal; however, this change was difficult and painful, so the green I choose is a sullen mossy green.

I put the colours together, and the interlinking yet separate patches of blue and green seem to perfectly illustrate my journey through abuse. Wow! This is my life! It is beautiful in a contradictory way, I decide. I proudly show my professor, and as he stares intently at my print, he asks, “Do you have a copy that I could keep?” Flabbergasted I reply, “Sure, of course,” while wondering why he would want it. I am certainly not one of his most talented students. He

continues, “I started a collection years ago of significant prints as keepsakes. I am captivated by the intense honest intimacy portrayed in this print. I would love to have a copy to show future students.” I feel proud of this personal piece of art and many years later, now matted and framed, this silkscreen hangs ironically over the toilet in my bedroom en suite. This diametric juxtaposition of a personal treasure with a toilet is fitting because male partner violence is such a waste of human dignity.

* * *

My silkscreen entitled “*Experience of Living and Leaving Abuse*” is displayed in my home in the most personal of rooms, my bathroom. It is nicely set in a thin black metal frame with slate-blue matting. Hanging to the left of my print and just above it is a bronze three-dimensional metal star with torch-cut swirls and circles on all three surfaces. The position of the star and drawing create the illusion that the woman in the silkscreen is reaching for the stars.

Similar to Freda Kahlo (1910-1954), who created autobiographical paintings filled with symbolic images depicting her emotional frame of mind, my silkscreen portrays personal meaning full of emotion and affect. When creating this print, emotions and feelings flowed out of me onto the paper. Mamet (1998) described the creative process that unfolds when creating art as a synthesis of our conscious and unconscious minds, a creative process that can bring us peace (p. 50). An image of a nude woman spans the height of the paper. When my art is viewed my secret is known. Standing naked and exposed in front of an audience is an apt symbol of lifting the silence of male partner violence (Kivel, 1996; Fourré, 2006).

The bottom third of the picture is heavy, weighted with dark shades of brown root-like stumps surrounded by two large hands outlined in dark brown. This area is also filled with violent words and phrases printed in capital black letters. The hands seem to have recently

released the woman; although they are open they remain close enough to grab her again at any moment. The hands simultaneously represent the all-encompassing abuser's hold on the woman emotionally, psychologically, sexually, spiritually, and physically, and a divine grace supporting the woman and giving her strength to move through and beyond the abuse. Being called "stupid," "fat," "lazy," and "useless" changed how I saw myself. Abuse is ugly, and when I see my former self believing those destructive messages, I am ugly, stuck, rooted in shame; believing that I am responsible for my suffering. Also at the bottom of the drawing, are the woman's legs depicted as tree stumps, representing my rootedness in values, giving me the strength to eventually parent on my own.

The central portion of the piece depicts the abdomen and reproductive area of the woman. This area is outlined with vibrant sweeping amethyst and bronze strokes highlighting the woman's sexuality and reproductive function. The background consists of prominent patches of blue, smaller areas of moss green, and small snippets of visible white paper. The central focal point is the woman's navel. My greatest accomplishment has been having the courage to leave my marriage and thus protect my children physically, emotionally, and psychologically and provide them with a healthy life free from abuse. Encouragement and strength-filled phrases are written just above the woman, reflecting the support received during this crucial period.

The top third of the print shows the woman's head, breasts and raised arms. In this, area are three focal points: the words **UNLIMITED POTENTIAL** which are directly behind the head, the hand-written word **Love** directly over the breasts, and the words **discovering self-identity** and **feeling free to be something more . . .** beside the upraised arms. **UNLIMITED POTENTIAL** is situated in a peach- and bronze-coloured area on the head which is depicted as an amethyst and dark brown mask. The words **UNLIMITED POTENTIAL** speaks about

endless possibilities and my healing journey, which includes educating myself about male partner violence (Bancroft & Patrissi, 2011), becoming an educated, self-reliant woman and mother, and holding on to the hope for a better life for myself and my children. ***Love*** is located on the woman's breast, the seat of love, and is outlined in amethyst and bronze segments. The word ***Love*** reminds me I am truly a loving and loveable worthwhile woman, something I knew as a child but lost in the abuse. ***Love*** for my family gave me the strength to persevere through the adversity of living with and leaving male partner violence. The words ***discovering self-identity*** and ***feeling free to be something more . . .*** are supported on the upstretched arms outlined in white and moss-green. One arm, wrapped around the head, displays the internal process of ***discovering self-identity***, and the other arm reaches beyond the woman as she is ***feeling free to be something more . . .*** breaking through all barriers.

Above the woman is the over-riding question ***Where Do I Go From Here?***, signifying the uncertainty, fear, and pain involved in this critical journey. The silkscreen displays the emotional confusion that still persists as I come to terms with what kept me in an unhealthy relationship for so long and the turmoil that resulted from my leaving.

* * *

I use personal art as an integral part of my stories. Visual representations such as art work or photographs portray a moment in time and a created perspective. Leavy (2009) elaborated that “visual art inherently opens up multiple meanings that are determined not only by the artist but also the viewer and the context of viewing (both the immediate circumstance and the larger sociohistorical context)” (p. 215). Art crosses linguistic and cultural boundaries. MacDougall (2006) stated that “one of the functions of art, and often of science, is to help us understand the being of others in the world” (p. 1). Creating a visual depiction of the violence I experienced

during and after leaving my marriage serves to humanize my emotional trauma while fostering connection, compassion and empathy by the viewer. MacDougall (2006) discussed how “Meaning guides our seeing. Meaning allows us to categorize objects” (p. 1) according to what we already know, in this way making them into the familiar. Therefore how we see the world and the meaning we make out of what we see is often “guided by cultural and personal interests” (MacDougall, 2006, p. 2).

MacDougall revealed, in *The Corporeal Image: Film, Ethnography, and the Senses*, his rationale for writing this book came from an attempt to use images in an academic discipline. He highlighted how “images reflect thought, and they may lead to thought, but they are much more than thought as something resembling language—the mind speaking to itself or as dictionaries put it, a process of reasoning” (2006, p. 1). I appreciate MacDougall’s dedication to showcasing the importance and integral nature of art in academic work. I agree that art provides us with another way of knowing and processing information. When we treat images as products of language we disregard the many ways that images create knowledge. Recognizing images as much more than nonlinguistic representations is vital because when we don’t, they become further subordinated to words. Rather we must “reexamine the relation between seeing, thinking, and knowing, and the complex nature of thought itself” (MacDougall, 2006, p. 2).

When one contemplates the use of images, simply insisting that we “do a better job of adapting them to the rules of scholarly writing” (MacDougall, 2006, p. 2) we are prone to make unhelpful compromises. MacDougall’s perspective on art and the use of images in academic work validates the non-traditional perspective my art offers to the multidimensionality of my research. I delight in the concept that “meaning shapes perception” as proposed by MacDougall (2006), who adds that “in the end perception can reconfigure meaning, so that at the next stage

this may alter perception once again” (p. 2). Contemplating how my artwork may serve as a conduit capable of altering society’s attitude toward women who continue to experience or who have experienced male partner violence brings me peace.

The print “*Experience of Living and Leaving Abuse*” has become my muse for my research and serves as a sociocultural, socioeconomic, and sociopolitical representation of my push-pull tug-of-war journey through male partner violence. My hope is that it may also serve as a muse for others. I recall the moment I realized my art could evoke a profound reaction.

* * *

As the class walks around the room viewing each other’s artwork, one woman stops at my print and begins to weep. I was initially shocked by her reaction and then I gently say

“Hi, I notice my print has had an impact on you,”

“Yes, it portrays my experience and my life with my husband,” she responds through her tears.

“If you feel comfortable talking about it, I would be interested in hearing your story,” I offer.

“That would be nice. I would like that,” she responds as she wipes her eyes. She continues, “My husband wrote a suicide letter and blamed me for his death when I wouldn’t agree to reconciling. It has been a miserable burden. Looking at your picture with all these familiar words are reminiscent of the life I lived with him. It was harmful and demeaning, but he just couldn’t let go of our relationship” As she shares such deeply personal details of her life with me, I feel honoured and touched.

We form a friendship over that summer, and then she moved away with her children to start life over. Although we have lost touch, her courageous, bright spirit remains with me and I

think of her each time I use the water jug she gave me as a gift. This clear glass vessel is simple yet intricate, with delicately hand-painted yellow, pink, orange, and blue lilies intertwining amongst swirling green vines. I have learned that connections are made in the most unexpected circumstances. This silkscreen continues to connect me with others and has grown into my muse encouraging me to tell my story. When I consider how my silkscreen became a pivotal piece of my autoethnography I think about the first time I showed it to my co-supervisor.

** * **

I am meeting with my co-supervisor Dr. Lee Murray to plan for an upcoming conference in Illinois. I have decided to use my thesis work using autoethnography as method. Lee, has previously attended the Congress of Qualitative Inquiry Conference in Urbana-Champaign, Illinois, and has invited me to attend and present at this conference and she assures me that presenting there will open up a whole new world to me. I am excited and during our conversation I mention my silkscreen.

“Lee, I created a silkscreen about my experience of male partner violence. I named it “Experience of Living and Leaving Abuse.”

“I’d love to see it.”

The next time we meet I bring my silkscreen to show her.

“Wow. I am struck by the juxtaposition of vulnerability and strength in your art, Sherrie. We should prepare an abstract about your silkscreen and possibly present it as well.”

“I’d like to do that.”

I promptly agree, not fully realizing what this would involve! I seriously did not think that through. My abstract is accepted—A Creative Expression of Living and Leaving Abuse.

Art can portray meaning simply by the viewer observing it, drawing on personal interpretation. Metaphors also convey meaning. Muncey (2010) stated how, metaphors “usefulness is that they can be extended and changed to provide a different way of viewing the world” (p. 61). For this reason, I believe metaphors are a fundamental strand in autoethnographic research. I refer to my research as a knotty affair, and an autoethnographic journey. I share the journey metaphor of transporting my silkscreen to an international conference as a different way of viewing my life through abuse.

* * *

I wonder how I will transport my silkscreen. Initially, I naïvely think I can take it on the plane rolled up in a cylinder; however, when I arrive at the framers my silkscreen is carefully placed in a flat cardboard covering.

“I was hoping to have the print rolled for ease of transport,” I stammer.

“Rolling up the print would harm its integrity” the woman advises.

“I was really counting on carrying the print in a cylinder,” I explain.

The woman sternly warns, “I recommend against rolling it.”

“Okay,” I agree hesitantly. “Could you wrap the cardboard with paper to protect it on the flight?”

“Of course, and you could tie a string around it to make it easier to carry on the plane,” she suggests.

“Sure,” I respond. I feel defeated as I tie a string around the cardboard protection. I feel anxious and unsure of the effort and value of transporting the silkscreen; it seems so cumbersome (much like the cumbrous period this print represents).

I receive confirmation that my abstract is accepted and I wonder who will even care about my artwork. I now struggle internally between trusting Lee and believing in my ability to discuss the significance of my silkscreen to a group of my peers.

Flight plans are made to attend the conference and several weeks later Lee and I are boarding the plane when the airline attendant stops me. Scolding me she maintains, "There is nowhere to put this. It is too big."

I begin to convince her why this precious package needs to accompany me on this flight.

Pleadingly and apologetically, I implore, "I am so sorry. I did not realize it would be such a problem. I've never done this before."

"We are really not supposed to do this," she warns as she turns to ask the pilot if she could store it behind his seat during the flight. My eyes follow the flight attendant's movement as she turns her back and speaks quietly to the pilot. My senses are sharp, pushing away the noises of the aircraft, passengers, and loud beating of my heart. I focus my eyes and ears to attempt to hear the conversation when the pilot lifts his head and looks in my direction. He gazes into my desperate pleading eyes and responds, "This one time."

"Thank-you, oh, thank-you so much, I really appreciate this," I sputter.

As I walk back to my seat with my heart still pounding in my ears, I wonder what I would have done if the pilot had not been so accommodating. I did not have a back-up plan.

I sigh as I question myself, what was I thinking? Who wants to look at my artwork anyway? I am so unprepared. I still have no clue what I am even going to say and I am on the way to the conference. Why did I so willingly agree to do this when Lee suggested this crazy idea? I trust her I really do, but do I trust myself? As I sit fidgeting in my seat on the airplane I

continue to ruminate over the significance of my silkscreen and what I will say for my fifteen minute presentation.

Lee and I arrive in Illinois on Thursday afternoon. I am hyper aware that my presentation is at 8 the next morning. After we check into the hotel Lee takes me for a walk around the campus. I desperately ask Lee for help, “Lee, what do I say?”

Lee suggests, “Perhaps you can talk about the process of creating the silkscreen and how you plan to use it in your autoethnography, Sherrie. Connect it to the sociocultural aspect of why male partner violence exists”.

I respond, “Thanks Lee,” but I am thinking, ‘Oh God, why did I agree to do this? I am going to present a silkscreen I made in a first-year university art class, at an international conference? Seriously! What was I thinking? Clearly, I wasn’t thinking’. Before Lee and I retire to our rooms for the evening we make a plan to meet the next morning at 7 for breakfast.

I wake up extra early to shower and get dressed and continue to contemplate what I am going to say to a group of my peers about my silkscreen. At breakfast I share with Lee my growing apprehension and uncertainty.

“I’m feeling anxious about what I am going to say, Lee.”

Once again Lee suggests “focus on the significance of the print and how you plan to incorporate it into your autoethnography.”

“Yah, I could do that,” I say, but I think, ‘what do I say to convey that?’

We eat the rest of our breakfast together in silence. I am lost in thought. Why do I feel so clueless and lost? I am willing to talk openly about my experience of male partner violence but why do I assume anyone will care. I certainly don’t want people to feel sorry for me because I suffered abuse.

“You look perplexed, Sherrie.”

Lee must have noticed the lost look in my eyes. I like how she seems so in tune with what is really going on with me. Lee has a presentation at the same time as mine, and although I would appreciate her supportive presence, I am on my own.

“I am just thinking about my presentation Lee; I will really miss your presence.”

“I wish I could be there too, Sherrie, but you will be fine. I have confidence in you.”

I nod and smile, but think, ‘I wish I had confidence in me.’

It’s about a ten-minute walk to the campus, we leave about 7:30 a.m. so we will each have time to set up in our rooms before our presentations. As we walk, we talk. I continue to nod and smile, but I am lost in my thoughts about how to effectively present my silkscreen. I think to myself ‘maybe it would be best to invite the audience to come close to view my silkscreen from their individual perspectives before explaining mine. It feels right,’ I decide.

* * *

I made the request of the audience to take a few minutes and carefully view my silkscreen. In this way I was inviting them to look closely at a societal issue that is unpleasant to acknowledge. This methodological format grants me permission to candidly give voice to my experience of male partner violence. Choosing autoethnography for my methodology allows me to use creative tools such as my artwork and stories as a means of enlightenment in communicating the intricate nature of male partner violence.

I believe art crosses cultural and linguistic boundaries of speaking to the legitimacy of lived experiences. Hein (1993) reinforced how aesthetic experiences are supportive to building community:

Aesthetic experience, like gender, is quintessentially qualifying, or adverbial. The manner of experiencing—not the object—is modified. It is commonly held that anything can be

experienced aesthetically—or not—at one and the same moment, by the same or different persons. Moreover, we invite others to share our perceptions aesthetically by taking them with us to experience what we experience and to talk about that experience together. (p. 8)

When I conceived and crafted *“Experience of Living and Leaving Abuse”* I unknowingly created a platform to look upon the multifarious nature of male partner violence. Not only was I perilously daring to publically display my silkscreen I was inviting others to participate in a conversation. I continue to question internally how to best speak my truth, my perceptions about the reality of living with and leaving male partner violence.

I wonder if anyone will dare or even care to look at my truth when I find it difficult. Self-esteem by definition according to Merriam-Webster is “the level of confidence and satisfaction” in oneself. Low self-esteem can lead to problematic issues in life, relationships and careers due to a poor self-opinion and feelings of doubt which happen to be residual effects of experiencing abuse. I struggle with my confidence; however, I am determined to confront this internal struggle and present myself to the audience. Following is an extension of the journey metaphor which embodies re-discovering my resourcefulness, courage and self-worth.

* * *

We arrive and walk into the Union Building. “Good luck Sherrie, you will do great.” Lee says to me as we part ways. Upon finding the room I am to present in, I nervously walk to the front and lean my artwork against a wall. As I look around the room I observe the absence of a stand. I wonder how I will display my silkscreen. As I carefully remove the print from the cardboard I notice I am able to make an inverted V from the cardboard and I prop the print against it. This will work! I smile as I secure my print to my macgyvered stand with reclaimed tape.

The room is called to order. I respectfully listen to the first presenter comparing her role of nurturing her students' creativity to that of a midwife. While I think about how Lee, my nurturing mentor, would fully appreciate this comparison, I miss her presence.

I say a silent prayer for protection and strength. Hail Mary, full of grace . . . please put your mantle of protection over me during this presentation. I stand up in front of approximately 30 people. I can feel the tension in my body. 'Act as if I am confident', I say to myself.

I blurt out. "I am nervous." I think, 'So much for acting confident!'

"I am Sherrie Gurel from Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada. I am presenting my silkscreen entitled "Experience of Living and Leaving Abuse", which I created for a university art class when my professor urged me to create something personal. I believe viewing art is a personal experience and we bring our own perspective with us when we encounter art. I would like to invite each of you to come up to the front to take a close look at my art while considering what it means to you."

I stand to the side as everyone gets up to take a closer look at my silkscreen. I feel so vulnerable and exposed much like the naked female body on the paper.

I wait until all have returned to their seats and I say "I plan to use my art in my autoethnography of experiencing male partner violence. Life can be surprising; when I created it I would never have imagined using it beyond the printmaking class."

As I look around the room I notice that everyone appears to be listening and interested in what I am saying. A wave of warmth washes over me as I feel a sense of pride. I continue talking about the importance of addressing the societal issue of male partner violence. We need more effective and affordable resources and long-term support for women and children to live free from violence as well as for more effective and affordable long-term rehabilitation for the

abuser. We live in a society that promotes a fast fix but the reality is this issue will take time in order to “change the abusive, controlling and entitled behaviors” (Bancroft, Silverman & Ritchie, 2012, p. 218) that continue to tear families apart.

My fifteen minutes is over so quickly. I thank people for listening. I place the silkscreen back against the wall and return to my seat.

Now it is time for questions from the audience for each of us presenters. The first question is posed to me, but it is not really a question but rather a statement.

“I am inspired to see such bravery at sharing such an intimate issue through the use of art for autoethnography. It is refreshing to see someone in the early stages of autoethnographic work,” states a man in the audience. I am touched by his kind words and as I listen, I feel a tingling sensation at my core.

Then another man shares, “I was struck by the effectiveness of being invited to come closer to the art in order to have an opportunity to experience it personally. It was so very effective!” I am overwhelmed with these kind words. I feel my blood vibrating as it courses through my veins.

“Your art is quality work and worthy of being a part of your autoethnography work. In fact it must be included in your thesis work.” a man offers as an affirmation.

‘I can’t cry,’ I tell myself as I feel my body tremble. I didn’t expect to hear such generous comments. I am struck by the fact that the audience was paying such close attention. Male partner violence is an important societal issue to share, talk about, and indeed examine closely! My whole body seems ignited, as if on fire. These are educated people and they like what they see, both my work and me. I am good enough! Why does it continually take affirmation from others to truly believe this? In this sacred moment, I become fully aware of Lee’s absence. It was

her idea to present my art at this international conference; how I wish she could be here to experience this with me. I feel both humble and strong standing here in front of this respectful audience.

My head is spinning with the compliments, positive feedback, and encouraging comments. More questions are asked of each presenter, and I sit there with pride, reflecting that although I am a woman who has experienced male partner violence, I did not allow it to diminish me in any way. I am worthy to be here today! I am so glad I trusted Lee.

As the time for questions draws to a close, one of the presenters directs a comment to me, "I want you to know how brave I think you are for sharing your art with us today and how much it has impacted me. Thank-you, Sherrie."

"Thank-you," I respond humbly.

'I actually presented at an International Conference!' I think to myself.

As I wrap my print up I suddenly realize that I have to get back to the hotel to get my props for my presentation with Lee. I literally run back to the hotel. I lay the silkscreen, once again wrapped in paper and tied with string, against the wall in my room. It is so hot, 34° Celsius, and I feel the moisture under my arms and trickling down my neck as I run back to the hotel. I quickly freshen up and gather my material for my presentation with Lee about autoethnography and mentorship. I then rush back to the campus in the squelching heat.

When I return to the hotel room much later in the day, I become aware through my exhaustion that I don't see my print. My room has been straightened up by the hotel staff and the print is missing. My heart stops, where is it? I can't lose it! I suddenly realize how important it is to me. What if it was thrown away?

I quickly run to the front desk of the hotel and share my story with the young woman working at the desk. "I left a piece of art in the room propped up against the wall. I have looked everywhere, and it's not in the room. It was quite large." I desperately trace a 2 x 3 foot rectangle in the air with my hands to illustrate the size of the print. I am feeling frantic at this point as I continue "It was wrapped in brown paper and tied with string. It was leaned up against the wall in my room right beside the television. It's gone. It's a valuable piece of art. I have to find it."

"I'll look for it." She replies. "What room are you in?" With a distraught look on her face, the clerk rushes out the back door.

With a heavy heart, I walk back to my room thinking about how much I need my print to be found. It has become so important to me. Why did it take something like this to force me to fully realize its significance?

I recall feeling intimidated in this class when I created this artistic piece and how inadequate I felt. I saw what other students were capable of creating and I was daunted by their creativity. They were incredibly talented! Perhaps this lack of self-confidence is a residual effect of the emotional and psychological abuse I endured during my 17-year marriage. I am only beginning to realize the importance of this silkscreen and what it has become.

Moments later there is a knock on my door. I take a deep breath as I open it.

"Is this it?" the woman at the door asks.

"Yes. Thank-you so much for finding it, thank-you, thank-you."

"I'm glad I was able to find it for you," she says with a big smile. "I found it out at the back."

I can only smile and nod at her as I take hold of the print.

I gently close the door of my hotel room and breathe a huge sigh of relief. I am sure she found it in the garbage bin out at the back, but I am happy she did not say it out loud. Lifting my words up to God, I repeat a hearty thank-you, thank-you, thank-you, as I lean against the closed door of my hotel room. I collect myself and check to make sure the print is unharmed. It is in good shape, and I find a safe place to store it so this unfortunate, heart-stopping incident doesn't recur. Initially, creating this visual representation of abuse was about receiving a class credit; however, now it is much more. It is a visual synopsis of this intense painful and transformative part of my life and also a graphic reminder of my tenacity and strength as a woman. The silkscreen "Experience of Living and Leaving Abuse" also provides a deep sense of pride as I recall the positive feedback I received from my peers. It is not garbage. It does not represent garbage. I am not ashamed of it! I recognize the incongruous irony as I hide the print inside the hotel closet to keep it safe.

* * *

Why is it easier to keep my silkscreen "*Experience of Living and Leaving Abuse*" locked away in the closet? It would be easier to keep my personal experience of living and leaving abuse hidden away to keep me safe from the shame of exposing my failure to preserve my nuclear family. Acknowledging one's shame isn't popular in our society; it remains a taboo topic. Brown (2008) noted how "shame is so powerful that we sometimes feel shame just talking about shame" (p. xiii). I am damned if I do profess my shame through my art and stories, and I damned if I don't profess my shame and expose my vulnerability with my art and stories.

As I share my intimate cultural experiences in this autoethnographic research, I see the cornerstone of male partner violence as shame. As Brown (2008) asserted in her shame research that she observed how shame draws its ominous power over us when we are most afraid of

losing our connection to others. Brown explained that when we feel shame, “we are steeped in the fear of being ridiculed, diminished or seen as flawed” (2008, p. 20). When I share these shame-filled stories I fear disapproval, being shunned, and deemed contemptible as an unworthy woman and mother (Brown, 2008). I think this may contribute to why there is very little autoethnographic research on male partner violence. I expose my shame of living with and leaving male partner violence through my art and stories for the purpose of fulfilling my graduate coursework. Doesn’t it make sense that I fear being ridiculed while I am putting myself at risk of losing acceptance that my research is worthy and scholarly?

I continue on this path of exposing my vulnerability in my research because I believe unravelling the knottiness of male partner violence begins by untying the threads of silence and shame that remain to hold this societal phenomenon together. Society continues to shame women for living with male partner violence even after she leaves. Brown (2008) discovered from her shame research that “women most often experience shame as a web of layered, conflicting and competing social-community expectations” (pp. 17-18) full of shoulds; who we should be, what we should be, and how we should be. As women become tangled in this shame web, feelings of distress culpability and disengagement ensue. Any one of these sentiments alone can be overwhelming but when woven together into shame, they become formidable (Brown, 2008).

In this cultural context, it is unconceivable that a woman would openly talk about her shame. When this shame is paired with being a woman living with and leaving male partner violence it creates a heavily padlocked closet door. Disturbing the silence serves to free the deadbolt’s power over being *that woman*. I continue to see the look on people’s faces when I disclose that I am one of *those women*. I see judgement, pity, and condemnation. I feel a change in interpersonal exchanges as my power shifts to a downward position especially with

colleagues. This is in diametric contrast to when, as a group facilitator, I disclose to women who have experienced male partner violence in a supportive group environment; where my power shifts to a position of engagement. My desire in opening the closet door is to let in a breath of fresh air and take a new look at women who have experienced male partner violence. They are not *broken* or *less than* because of their circumstances.

I am damned if I do tell and expose my secrets, and damned if I don't tell and perpetuate the silence and secrecy around male partner violence. It is more socially acceptable to leave an abusive relationship than it is to talk about it. Incongruously, breaking the silence of male partner violence is a dominant discourse in current society. "Become a silence breaker" advised Dr. Phil (2010) on his television talk show and website promoting the 'End the Silence of Domestic Violence' campaign. Yet our current society tends to look away, close their eyes, and walk away when encountered with personal stories of intimate partner violence. My stories, journals, artwork and court transcripts would not merit extraordinary or thrilling fodder seen in television talk shows such as Jerry Springer, Dr. Phil, or Oprah; they do include distressing details.

In telling my tale I break the silence for myself and for my three daughters; however, breaking the silence to expose the devastating impact male partner violence has on my children and on myself is a knotty affair. The historic tradition of keeping family secrecy dies hard as Poulos (2009) noted. When I speak openly about how I was psychologically and physically abused I am breaking the silence of our family secret. As I am carefully weaving the threads of shame and secrecy into stories, a valuable composition emerges by this process that is "magical, transformative, [and] filled with power" (Poulos, 2009, p. 139). I too am discovering how a "family once beset by trauma and tragedy and deep, dark sadness can, gradually, emerge into the

light of story and healing and joy” (Poulos, 2009, p. 140). As I expose the shadow behind the closet door I discover the treasure of my silkscreen.

Could this be why my silkscreen is so significant? It represents where I have come from, what I have been through, and who I am today. My creative expression is multi-faceted in its portrayal of male partner violence. It displays the emotional, psychological, and spiritual violence I endured, the fears that paralyzed me along with my hope for a future free from violence. I have come to see this print as valuable and representative of my significance and worth. So my silkscreen has come to represent a monumental paradigm shift in my life; it has grown into a candid trophy, a heraldic sign of transforming trauma into triumph. Confessing my shame presents me with the golden opportunity to shed light on the secrets that have allowed male partner violence to persist in our society. Continuing to keep my silkscreen locked away in a closet with my shame-filled stories only serves to perpetuate the unmentionable societal phenomenon of male partner violence.

* * *

My stories are told from my recollection, understanding, and perspective. They are my stories. Richardson (2009) describes how her writing process involves writing with no end in mind, because knowing would impede her creativity. So with no end in mind I begin writing not knowing what epiphanies I may find along this introspective and creative writing pursuit. I am damned if I do dig in and delve into the trauma, and damned if I don't dig in and begin telling my tale.

When I dig in to categorically examine aspects of my personal experience of living with and leaving male partner violence I open myself up to relive previous suffering. As I delve into the caverns of past despair, pain, and shame I grapple with my imperfections and limitations. As

I research the fallout and shrapnel of male partner violence I uncover and reflect on considerations, thoughts and intentions throughout my life with Reginald. I can now comprehend past choices from a different vantage point. This thesis acts as a mirror of my years spent with my abuser and the years of recovery from male partner violence. Readers of this work will experience vicariously my painful journey, which I hope will create a platform for understanding, connection and empathy. I allow myself to be vulnerable so others may learn from my personal struggles. There are risks involved in letting the world know my story. However, I trust that I am at a place in my journey that the benefits of doing so will outweigh the risks.

I am damned if I don't tell my tale because I keep the established silence prevalent in male partner violence. In order to keep my secret I owned the shame inherent in male partner violence, which only served to maintain an unhealthy and unsafe marriage for far too long. I have come to acknowledge as did Poulos (2008) how secrets have a way of crippling and interfering with living a healthy life. Sharing my stories about the magnitude male partner violence has had on my life is indeed a distressing mission; however, it is also a palliative endeavour. I use the word palliative because there is therapeutic value to the self-reflection involved in this research; however, it does not negate being forever altered by the trauma of male partner violence.

Talking openly about abuse is important in healing; a healthy openness, a connection is created between the storyteller and the listener (Bancroft, 2004). Poulos (2009) believed secrets don't remain hidden and eventually begin to interfere in living a healthy life. He asserted when we have the courage to breathe new life into a story that's a long kept secret then there is hope for a positive change through creating a new image for the story. Similar to Poulos I move "the

secret out of its place of captivity into the communicative repertoire of the family” (2009, p. 18) to find restoration through conversations about my thoughts, feelings and experiences. I have come to acknowledge that “abuse thrives only in silence” (Cohen, 2012) as Leslie Morgan Steiner stated publically about her own personal experience. Now is the time for me to openly discuss male partner violence; it has been a family secret for too long.

Silence fosters shame. Brown (2008) described how keeping secrets serves to “create a society that fails to recognize how much damage shame does to our spirit and to the soul of our families and our communities” (p. 2). We miss the link between individual suffering and sociocultural problem due the inherent silence in shame (Brown, 2008). Society is open to discussing emotions such as fear and anger with Anger groups and Anxiety workshops being accepted as commonplace. However shame continues to be unmentionable. Mental health professionals, researchers, physicians and other professionals are the people the general public count on to broach prevalent social issues such as shame. This is important to mention because as Brown (2008) asserted “shame is universal—no one is exempt” (p. 3). Through acknowledging my own shame and assessing its impact in my life, I hope it will be helpful to others. Shame is illustrated in my print.

Some days when I look at the print, I feel the piercing impact of the violent words written on it. So many years I have mourned and healed the shattering of my reality, and yet like a bow’s arrows, these words still plunge into me. The words depicted are cutting and cruel, but I no longer bleed. I have a new awareness that these words are indeed violent and they represent the anguish and the magnitude of the violence in my marriage.

My silkscreen provides an opportunity to glimpse at an uncomfortable condition that exists in our world. However, gazing upon this sensitive societal phenomenon can be disturbing.

I recognize that society often closes its eyes and walks away when it observes an uncomfortable sociocultural, sociopolitical, and socioeconomic reality. The issue does not go away. On my healing journey I invite you to gaze upon my painful truths, moments, and decisions. Over time I have come to replace the disempowering nature of the words in my silkscreen with courage, strength, and optimism.

* * *

The art and stories herein serve to reveal the multifariousness of living with and leaving male partner violence. Focusing on the trauma and impact to mothers' and children's self-worth, resiliency, and socioeconomic and the sociopolitical status. This research is a process of bringing to light what kept me in my marriage for so long as I analyze the many facets of myself: Catholic woman, mother, wife, and single parent living in Canada. It also helps me understand why and how I eventually left the abusive relationship and why that decision was so difficult.

Stories and personal artwork transcend many cultures (Mehl-Madrona, 2005). Pelias (2004) highlighted the importance of useful scholarship reaching toward an audience. At this point my audience is primarily academia; however, my hope is that it will touch and resonate with a wider audience, such as health care professionals, mental health professionals, legal professionals, and women who continue to live with or who have lived with, and left male partner violence. It has the possibility to create connections, open up minds, and challenge existing stereotypes.

Art is integral in sharing my reality and struggle. The push and pull of fear kept me in limbo. Should I continue to live like this? Will it eventually get better? Is it better to leave this unhappy life to start over? Artwork and stories convey another way of knowing and perceiving therefore I use them in my research to address a significant sociocultural phenomena; male

In the next chapter I include Ellis's line of reasoning for incorporating stories into my research. Personal accounts have the ability to be a "source of empowerment and a form of resistance to counter the domination of canonical discourses" (Bochner, 2000, p. 271). My aspiration is to devictimize the denigrated identity of women who have experienced and lived with or continue to live with male partner violence. I strive to render what it means to live with shame and to challenge the existing societal stereotypes through my personal declaration (Couser, 1997). As Ellis and Bochner (2000) discovered autoethnography tells stories that invite the reader to put themselves in the place of the writer/researcher. I am convinced that autoethnography not only fits me personally but it allows me the privilege and freedom to respectfully portray my personal experience of living with and leaving abuse.

CHAPTER 2: Vision Quest to Autoethnography



Figure 2: “Self Portrait”. 2003.

Pen and ink on paper. 12 x 13½ (30.48 x 34.29). Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.

My art is the first intermediary where I feel safe to express my secret and my vulnerability. Upon instruction I produce this portraiture with pen and ink. During intersession, I attend an Introduction to Drawing class; in the first week students are asked to bring in previously crafted artwork. I hesitantly display my print entitled “*Experience of Living and*

Leaving Abuse.” As the class walks around the room viewing each other’s artwork, one woman stops at my print and begins to weep. In retrospect, on a subliminal level, I think this may have been the spark that ignited my awareness of the importance of illuminating the reality of male partner violence.

Much like a photograph, a self-portrait is a snapshot of a suspended moment in time. Around the time I am taking the drawing class, my mother is ill with what we believe to be pneumonia. My siblings and I don’t yet know this will be our last summer with her. I am unhappy with my appearance at this time because I am overweight. So when I am assigned to draw a self-portrait, the idea of creating an immortalized version of me is unsettling; however, I sit in front of a floor length mirror and begin. Spending hours gazing at my image I focus on accurately creating a realistic portrayal reflecting how I appear at this moment in time.

Once I select the paper, I apply layers of an ink wash with broad strokes, using a large brush to render depth in the background. Then with a fine metal-tipped pen dipped in ink, I add details to create definition. Facial features emerge and reveal themselves through alternating areas of prominent black lines and shades of grey. Substantial well-defined eyebrows portray my strength and resilience. Inharmoniously; however, my eyes appear listless and vacant, expressing my disillusionment with life. My obscure mouth is small, with the top lip being barely discernible. A strong black line fuses together the lips rendering them, and thus me, silent. I apply rapid strokes multi-directionally, manufacturing various shades and textures in order to create my cheeks, chin, and neck. Remarkably evident in this subdued façade is the lightest area on the paper. It is a central section on the forehead, which could symbolize my insight. The juxtaposition in this piece of art is seen in the sombre aura of my appearance and the stalwart resilience distinguishable in the carefully placed earrings and tenderly crafted tresses of my hair.

When preparing the paper for exhibition, my neck and shoulders were cut off the image. Later, grasping the importance of this portrait, I reposition the excised piece; fittingly, the line where I rejoined the ‘pieces of myself’ is still visible. Unexpectedly, while examining the artistic techniques I used in my self-portrait, I discover the emotive aspect of this image. This transposed semblance reveals a reconnection to my voice sharing my secret. Many factors led to the emotional anguish illustrated in my pen and ink drawing; poverty, illness, fear, and a sense of feeling utterly alone. My self-portrait reveals an internally fluctuating and transformational period of my life.

Autoethnography is like a self-portrait, like my self-portrait it graphically expresses the emotional aspects of the knotty affair about living with and leaving male partner violence. Coming to terms with using autoethnography to present my research has been wrought with inner-turmoil and self-discovery. I first explored autobiography using a feminist lens but I felt it lacked the emotive and creative facets to allow me to be fully true to myself. Autoethnography allowed me to challenge how women are viewed in our society. Over time I become aware of how society and culture are an inherent to how I view myself as a woman. Autoethnography provided an opportunity for discovery, healing, and a transformed perception of my self-identity and of others (Spry, 2006). By means of using autoethnographic methodology I attempt to disturb society’s negative preconceptions of women who have experienced male partner violence.

Scrutinizing my lived experience by traversing through research, writing, self-analysis, and personalizing the literature has led to an existential crisis yielding many epiphanies (Zaner, 2004). I acknowledge that while these epiphanies have been transformational for me, they may not be for you. I impart with you “effects that linger—recollections, memories, images,

feelings—long after a crucial incident is supposedly finished” (Bochner, 1984, p. 595). My desire is to share my epiphanies in addition to the powerful push-pull discord between, do I stay or do I leave?

*McIlveen (2008) discovered how an autoethnography has the ability to provide a genuine narrative while still creating a meaningful account which enables “the reader to deeply grasp the experience and interpretation of this one interesting case” (p. 13). Heartfield (2013) correspondingly reported, “As we journalists know well, sometimes the best way to get people to care about injustice on a mass scale is to focus on the story of one person” (Sunday Star Phoenix, August 4, 2013, p. D2). I invite you to situate yourself with me through my wrangling and wonderings on this autoethnographic affair. Autoethnography often presents “more questions than answers” (Rambo, 2007, p. 34). Certainly there are questions that I have not yet comprehended. I continue to have unanswered questions regarding what kept me so entangled in such an emotionally violent marriage for so long and why it took such an extreme event for me to leave.

* * *

This is the story about realizing how important it is to share my story; my hope is that it will be meaningful to others.

One night, as part of fulfilling the requirements for my master’s program, I am facilitating “Abuse and Beyond,” a closed group designed for women who have experienced male partner violence. We are discussing the dynamics of leaving an abusive relationship and the difficulty of determining if this is truly the right decision. I listen to the women exploring this complex topic, and I think to myself, ‘Should I share my own personal experience of leaving?’ A multitude of questions flood my consciousness. ‘What about self-disclosure? How much self-

disclosure is appropriate? Is this about my healing or sharing my story in order to help others? Should I find out?' I think to myself.

I stand in front of the women with my hands folded and resting under my breasts. Somehow I have discovered that this stance comforts me in stressful situations when speaking in front of an audience, and yet I can still feel tension in my chest and shoulders as I begin to speak to the group:

I asked God on many occasions to give me a sign, any sign, to help me know what the right course of action was, to stay or to leave. I was married in the Catholic Church and the sacrament of marriage is something I believe in and value very much. My values tell me that marriage is forever, so how could I even be considering leaving this man that I chose to sacramentally join in the church 17 years earlier? Although I had left twice before, it was never with the intention of starting over without him. I left to make a point and to let him know that I was unhappy and that I deserved to be treated respectfully. I take a breath and let out a big sigh. I pause, fighting back the flood of tears I feel waiting to break free. I take another deep breath and I continue.

My oldest daughter was ten years old at the time and had suffered a blow to the head at the hands of her father. He said he had to hit her because when he ordered her to pick up the Lego blocks she had been playing with, she did not comply. Buttercup, who was 18 months old at the time, had been playing in the room and he explained that he was concerned for her safety and did not want her to choke on Lego. I can still so clearly see my beautiful ten-year-old daughter rolling around on the floor in intense pain.

One day after Reginald hurt my daughter, I drove to Saskatoon to attend a craft sale. He had insisted that our other two daughters would come with me and our oldest daughter would

stay home so she wouldn't miss school. Reginald was furious with me for leaving during such a busy time of the year. I was confused by this because he knew I was going to the craft sale as I been creating flower arrangements in the house for weeks.

As I continue I become aware of my breathing. It is slower and laboured. I also notice a dull pain above my eyes. I don't know if I will ever truly be able to forgive myself for the suffering my precious daughter endured at the hands of her father? I guess I could have left sooner. Perhaps, I should have left sooner. Now a tear rolls down my nose. I explain to the group that I experience so much pain, guilt, shame, for thinking, no truly believing that staying in this marriage is truly what God wanted me to do. Wiping away the tears on my wet cheeks, I wonder, where is a tissue when I need one? I look around the group and decide to share only snippets of the rest of the story with them. I continue:

I was in a tenuous position and I needed to make a decision. When I told my sister about what happened to my oldest daughter. She said she was going to phone social services to report the abuse my husband inflicted on my daughter. My sister's words still ring in my ears, "If you want to live that life it is your business, but I will not stand by while the children are being hurt."

"You don't understand" I pleaded with her "I tried to protect her."

My sister gave me the night to sleep on it, after I begged, pleaded and cried to my other sister to reason with her. I asked, "What about my daughter back on the farm?" One of my deepest fears was to abandon any of my children.

My sister, who lived in Saskatoon, agreed to drive the three hours to pick her up from school the next morning if I agreed to stay in Saskatoon. So I tossed and turned all night, crying, praying, and begging God for a sign, any sign. I would no longer be picky. Please Lord; just tell me what to do, I prayed all night. There was no sleep for me that long tumultuous night. I looked

at the clock and it was 7 a.m. I picked up the phone without a thought and asked my sister if she would pick Dianthus up from school. Without hesitation, my sister replied that she was on her way. I recall hanging up the phone and feeling a warmth wash over my entire being, filling me with a sense of calm and peace I had never felt before. I pause and look around the room.

Through my tears I noticed the women crying with me.

I continue, "I believe this was the sign I had prayed for: the Holy Spirit had provided me with the peace I had so desperately yearned for. I realized that first I had to act to receive the sign". In this moment I feel a healing connecting energy in the room. Because of the intense emotionality in the room I announce a 15-minute break and take time to compose myself. When we all return to the room, I address what has taken place and check to see if everyone is all right. To my surprise, many of the women share with me how moved they are that I trusted them enough to stand before them and expose my vulnerability. I was able to be with them as myself, a human being, with all my imperfections.

As I reflect on sharing my story with this group of women I am filled with intense emotions, including guilt and shame. When I think about disclosing this private moment to the group, it's as if I were floating above myself watching as I stood there with my arms folded under my breasts, I was shaking and crying, while baring my soul. It was all in slow motion, and noticing the women weep with me drew me back into my body as we all formed a spiritual bond. Their comments made me realize how important it is to tell my story, not just for me but for other women who have experienced male partner violence. I want to tell my story and perhaps it will resonate with others so that they too may begin to understand the struggles, challenges related to staying in and leaving an abusive relationship. I felt inspired by the synergy during the group.

The next day I walk into Dr. Tim Claypool's (my supervisor) office, and share with a shaky voice, "I need to change my thesis topic and methodology. I believe it is important for me to tell my story."

* * *

Hiemstra (2001) wrote when we share our story "our learning moves beyond a solitary experience to one based on the potential of synergistic interaction with others" (p. 22). By sharing the chaos in my life, I was also authenticating women's experiences of societal stigma (Tullis Owen, McRae, Adams, & Vitale, 2009). Disclosure is beneficial when its intent is one of caring and when it is presented in an optimistic manner. When disclosure is communicated in this way it becomes a fundamental approach "to breaking up heavy, historical restraints of canonical narratives that perpetuate pain and paralysis of the human condition" (Tullis Owen et al. 2009, p. 194). This anguish persists in women who continue to live with and for those who have left male partner violence.

Before I fully embraced autoethnography for my research method I presented at Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association (CCPA) conference in Ottawa. My presentation for the conference was titled, "Losing Myself in Love: An Autobiographical Exploration of Male Partner Violence". Tim introduced me before my PowerPoint presentation with these kind and generous words:

Sherrie's research is personal yet professional. She has a strong desire to use her research to inform and educate professionals. It was Sherrie's choice to complete an autobiographical study. I stress this fact due to the sensitive nature of her study. The supervisor's role is one of support while constantly engaging in a risk/benefit analysis. Sherrie is empowered by her research but also endangered. I remained the "guide at the side" that admired her courage but recognized her vulnerability. To be honest, there were times when I wished she chose a different route or topic. But I also understood and

respected why Sherrie needed to engage in this academic yet highly personal process. Sherrie continually demonstrates four distinctive qualities: courage, determination, tenacity, and compassion. When I asked her about presenting at CCPA, she was keen and her enthusiasm and resolve has never wavered. Sherrie's presentation embodies the theme of this conference, where she will be bringing together ideology, theory, and practice. In Sherrie's introduction section of her thesis proposal, she made the following statement: "I am certain that in telling my story, my audience will have an opportunity for deeper empathy, understanding, and a fuller awareness on issues of male partner violence."

Sherrie is an inspiration in every sense of the word.

I treasure Tim's kind words. I truly believe we all have an opportunity at various junctures in our lives to inspire others.



So what happened? Was sharing my story with the support group the catalyst that led me to change my methodology? Or perhaps it was the knottiness and complexities of male partner violence? Male partner violence is convoluted. I initially painstakingly researched and prepared the first three chapters of my proposal defense to discuss why autobiography through a feminist lens was the best method for my research. I arrived at crossroad when I was preparing for my proposal defense and I looked at my research. It had become too neat and tidy, almost sterile, lacking any personal expression and creativity. I struggled internally with a strong desire to be done my graduate work while being true to myself. I had been advised to approach my work academically and not get dragged into just telling a story.


By keeping my personal story separate I could get it out of the way, but there is nothing neat and tidy about male partner violence. It is messy and requires messy work to unearth and investigate. For my thesis to be meaningful and transformative, I needed to reveal my passion for this issue. My work felt empty; it was as if I had been gleaned right off the paper. I am a creative woman, and when I took a closer look at autoethnography I saw a multitude of creative examples I could incorporate to convey worthwhile academic research. I genuinely wanted "to write from


my bones—from losing enough of my self-consciousness to form connections, in a way that takes my breath away, tastes and looks and feels, and opens up a place of understanding” (Davis & Ellis, 2008, p. 110). But writing from your bones hurts. It is painful and it is not something you pursue on your own, at least not the first time. It is something you do with mentorship and support.

* * *


When I heard about Dr. Lee Murray’s autoethnographic research for her dissertation, I initially approached her for some advice regarding using autoethnography for my methodology. I discussed this idea with Dr. Tim Claypool, he thought getting some extra help would prove useful as neither of us had any practical knowledge of autoethnography. One thing led to another, and soon we agreed Lee would be helpful as a committee member. In time, Tim believed Lee would best serve as a co-supervisor, I agreed.


Lee and I meet at Starbucks to discuss this option. This conversation is performed using speech  and thought  bubbles to convey and contrast what we are saying with what we are actually thinking. The dialogue is created to help describe the convoluted, tenuous, and intimate nature of supervising and doing autoethnography research.


Lee:  – Hi Sherrie. How are you? I have been considering your request for me to be a co-supervisor on your committee and I have decided to accept. I would be willing to be a co-supervisor for your graduate work regarding male partner violence.


Lee:  – What am I doing? This will be so much more work than being a consultant or committee member. BUT, this is important work and the U of S does not seem to be moving forward very quickly with arts-based/narrative methodology and in particular autoethnography

(A/e). I was one of the first to use A/e as methodology, and I remember the struggle to defend A/e as a very useful and relevant methodology, a very scholarly methodology. I had wonderful support through that journey and I think Sherrie deserves the same.

Sherrie:  – Good, I am so relieved. It has been difficult trying to explain what I want/need to do. Ever since I decided to tell my story and realized how important it was to tell my story for my thesis, it has been such a challenge to find the proper methodology.

Sherrie:  – Thank God! Finally somebody gets me!

Lee:  – Can you tell me a bit more about what it is you have been up to and where you would like to go with this research?

Sherrie:  – Well, first I believed autobiography was more appropriate, and I resisted using autoethnography because of the culture dimension. It's like if I think of my experience in a separate cultural dimension, a separate society of women who experience male partner violence distinct and apart from the rest of society. I believe domestic violence affects all of society not just individual women and children. In researching domestic violence I have found and read an overwhelming amount of literature on the effects of domestic violence. There is so much healing and recovery work necessary to move beyond the abuse; however, my experience will always be a part of who I have become.

* * *

To determine if I would be accepted to live at Adelle House I meet with Phoebe, the in-house social worker and counsellor.

“Women living here have the unique opportunity to learn and grow in knowledge, empathy, and acceptance. I believe in creating a rainbow of sorts” explains Phoebe.

“Wow, that’s sounds like a great idea, I am excited to live here” I respond.

Soon after this initial meeting I am accepted and I move in with Dianthus, Rose, and Buttercup. I notice how many cultures are represented in this micro-world; Vietnamese, Iranian, Polish, Norwegian, First Nations, Ethiopian, and Ukrainian. My life has changed since the world opened up to me or rather, I opened myself up to the world.

Meeting Lola had a huge impact in my life; our lives mirrored each other.

“I met my husband when I was young and we have been married for 15 years, I still love him” Lola confesses.

“I was 17 when I met my husband and we have been married for 17 years, I love him but I don’t know if I can ever go back to him” I admit.

“I love the wide open space of the reserve and my children miss their animals” continues Lola.

“My children miss the unrestrictive freedom of the farm and all the animals too” I concur.

“I grew up on the reserve; I have lived there my whole life. I have had very little to do with other cultures. I find my ideas about white people changing from meeting you” Lola confides.

“Meeting you has definitely changed my perceptions of women who are First Nations. While I grew up in a small city I spent much of my childhood on the family farm” I explain to Lola. “I have had little exposure to other cultures as well”. We smile at each other as we acknowledge these meaningful similarities of our lives.

I write in my journal dated Wednesday, January 13, 1999, 1:40 a.m.

We had our support meeting tonight at Adelle House. Lola my neighbour in 105 told us tonight she is going back to her husband in March. She told us how he has been working on his stuff and she feels confident that he has changed enough. They’ve been married fifteen years. My

heart was broken. Part of me wanted to shake her while the other part of me was jealous. But ultimately I'm genuinely worried for her. I think about if she goes back and things don't work out. She won't be leaving him again ever.


I find myself doubting my commitment to myself to make it on my own. I will try to be aware of self-sabotage.

My journal dated *Saturday, May1, 1999, 3:21 a.m.*

I got a letter from Lola today. She had gone back to her husband to give it another try. It didn't work out but she is doing okay. Hearing from her gave me more strength and conviction in what I am doing, starting my life over alone.


I did not hear from Lola again, I pray she is safe and happy in her new life. This was a paradigm shift for me. Learning to focus on our similarities as women has made me a better more compassionate woman, mother, and professional.


* * *


Sherrie:  – The World Health Organization identified how, “Domestic violence is the most common form of violence against women across the globe. . . . Yet no other major problem of public health has – until relatively recently– been so widely ignored and so little understood” (Garcia-Moreno, Jansen, Ellsberg, Helse, & Watts, 2005, p. 90). “Domestic violence is the leading cause of injury to women, causing more injuries than muggings, stranger rapes, and car accidents combined,” (Allen & Kivel, 1994, p. 53) a fact highlighted in *Ms. Magazine*. Only physical violence is addressed in these statistics; there is also emotional, psychological, sexual, financial violence, etc. Statistics Canada (2006) referred to several studies about male partner violence that revealed the significant economic “costs related to health care, criminal justice, social services, and lost income” (Johnson, p. 35). This evidence shows how society as a whole is affected by the shrapnel of male partner violence, not just the victims and families who experience the violence.


I resisted discussing my story in the context of a separate culture because I thought it would perpetrate the view of abused women as being the “other” (Canales, 2000; Maccallum, 2002; hooks, 2004; Grant & Zeeman, 2012), which perpetuates violence and silences women from seeking help (Poulos, 2009). After all, who wants to admit to being one of *those* women, victims who allowed their abuse to continue? Ellis (2004) says that “the primary purpose of personal narrative is to understand a self or some aspect of a life lived in a cultural context” (p. 45). I agree with Ellis (2004) when she says that in writing about oneself we open ourselves up to criticism about how we’ve lived. Disclosing my story opens me up to criticism about continuing to live with violence throughout my marriage while allowing my children to be hurt. It is a difficult burden to bear.


I chose autobiography because I did not fully understand what autoethnography entailed. I just kept going back to how important it is to tell my story. I felt the power of my story when I disclosed it to a group as a facilitator. A respected feminist shared how “writing the autobiographical narrative enabled [her] to look at [her] past from a different perspective” and then “use this knowledge as a means of self-growth and change in a practical way” (hooks, 1998, p. 432). I recognize that I can share and educate my colleagues as well through the telling of my story. I just can’t seem to walk away from it!


Lee:  – You are so brave Sherrie! It takes so much courage to tell your story.


Sherrie:  – She really does get me! How did I get so lucky!


Lee:  – Will I be able to be there for Sherrie when she struggles with her stories? There is so much intertwined in our stories about life, relationship, parenting, and identity.


Sherrie:  – I appreciate your knowledge of autoethnography, and I am thrilled by your passion for the methodology. I think I can now really be able to tell my story with your support, guidance, and knowledge.


Sherrie:  – It is one thing to supervise but another thing to support such emotional work.


Lee:  – You are welcome Sherrie. I am very happy to assist you in any way I can.


Lee:  – But what about boundaries? I have a background in counselling/family therapy but that is not my role as supervisor...or is it? How do you work so closely with someone through their emotional work that involves trauma, loss, and grief and stay outside of that? Can I? Should I?


Lee:  – What are the important pieces that you want to share or are willing to share? What stories are important to tell?


Sherrie:  – There is so much to tell because my entire life has been affected and is influenced by the trauma of male partner violence. I have children and the process of going through pre-trial and trial was not only emotionally draining, but also financially draining. I have had to live on social assistance and live well below the poverty line while providing an adequate life for my three children. I am concerned about how their lives have been affected, and I strive to be a positive role model in their lives. I also needed to focus on myself and my personal healing throughout all of this.


Sherrie:  – Don't cry Sherrie—keep it together. I'm going to scare her away. She is going to think I can't keep it together.


Lee:  – Those are difficult stories to tell. I understand how difficult they are to tell and perhaps difficult to hear.


Lee:  – I will just sit here with the emotion; it's okay, it's appropriate, and it's powerful. I trust that Sherrie will work through this and come out the other side intact.


Sherrie:  – But what will she think when she hears my stories? Will she be able to sit with me through my tears and not try to rescue me? It's such a relief to feel safe to cry. Crying is such an important part of feeling connected to the pain I have experienced in my life. I can work through the tears and I will be okay and it looks like Lee will be okay too.


Sherrie:  – I get so frustrated with my emotions sometimes!


Sherrie:  – I am frustrated because I want to continue to talk through my emotions but my voice gets stuck.


Lee:  – There is so much emotion there. This will be difficult work for Sherrie, and that emotion is a big part of her story. This process could be very cathartic and healing for her but also painful.

Sherrie:  – It is so nice feeling comfortable. I appreciate your validation of my topic and methodology, which is very different from a previous experience. I really can handle constructive criticism! In fact, I welcome it.


Lee:  – That's good to know. You're welcome.


Sherrie:  – It is the destructive criticism that stops me dead in my tracks. It's like I am back in an abusive relationship! It seems like Lee understands how much power she has in my life through this process. I really appreciate her humility and gentle honesty.


Sherrie:  – I struggle with the misuse of power. The reality is that my co-supervisors and committee member have power over me through this process. As my co-supervisor Lee, you know it and I know it. I feel vulnerable because I struggle internally with my ability to be an academic.


Lee:  – There's that word again. The word "academic" seems to disturb Sherrie or perhaps it threatens her in some way. I wonder if it is connected to anything in Sherrie's past? The word seems to reduce her, render her speechless, voiceless, and emotional. I know that she feels that she is not an academic because she has disclosed this to me in the past. It is like "academic" means separating yourself from your work, separating the student/professional from the personal. As if personal cannot be academic or something; trying to be more objective or something. I HATE THAT—the whole idea about bracketing is absurd to me now. It reminds me of my master's thesis... I was exploring the perceptions of adolescents living with parental alcoholism (Murray, 1997: 1998). I interviewed each of the 5 participants three times. The stories they told were often emotional, heart breaking and disturbing. At the time I was also learning the art and science of counselling and I often struggled with attempting to bracket but also be therapeutic. I believe that perhaps I did a better job in being therapeutic than I did of bracketing and I was challenged on that during my final defense. However I don't believe we can do both and why would we choose not to be therapeutic if someone is struggling? I then went on to publish an article about how qualitative research interviews may be therapeutic for the participants (Murray,


2003). Mentoring graduate work is like that too—we can't bracket if we want to be effective mentors, advisors, supervisors. We are people, we are social, cultural, political and personal beings. We cannot attempt to hide our beliefs, values, assumptions, biases, etc. and we cannot distance ourselves from the stories we are hearing and reading.


Lee:  – So what does academic mean anyway?


Sherrie:  – I don't know. I guess I personalize this. When I hear someone say, "This is not academic" or "make this academic," I hear, "you are not an academic." What's funny is that I want to be a counsellor, which is why I pursued a master's degree. I have come to realize that others take me more seriously with a master's degree. This is the second part of my life, a life I could never even have imagined at one time. I will be a lifelong learner because there is so much to learn and I have developed a genuine love for it.


Lee:  – So what is happening is that we are aiming to do "scholarly work," and we are doing that.


Sherrie:  – Ya, that fits for me!


Lee:  –What we want is power with rather than power over. Mentorship needs to avoid making people/students feeling diminished in some way. We need to be thoughtful in our comments and feedback because we are critiquing very personal, emotional, and heartfelt stories. This reminds me of my own work "Secrets of Mothering," (Murray, 2010) which included very personal stories, and I found myself stepping outside the story to edit, spell check, grammar check, rewrite, and critique. I felt the weird sensation of separating from my own story. We need to remember and be able to recall the feeling of the personal.


Sherrie:  – I know what you mean about that out-of-body experience. I can also relate to the feeling when your personal stories are being critiqued objectively. Like Ellis (2004) says, there is no need to be brutally honest because it is often more helpful to be lovingly honest (p. 177).


Lee:  – Ya ... so when I give you feedback, I need to be very thoughtful in terms of how I communicate that to you. I need to be very aware of your vulnerability and how you may feel exposed at times.

Lee:  – I also struggle sometimes with whether a student is ready to share their story. Are they ready to do this work?

Sherrie:  – I have to admit Lee, I am really excited about working with you.

Sherrie:  – It's going to be okay!

Lee:  – This will be a valuable journey, not just for Sherrie and me, but also for so many other women and children who have been affected by male partner violence.

Lee:  – I look forward to working with you too!

* * *

Now after a year working with Lee and Tim, and learning more about autoethnographic research, I can truly appreciate Lee's thought regarding "whether a student is ready to do this work." A critical aspect for completing a successful autoethnography is having a strong foundation in creativity, skills in writing, emotional support and academic assistance through the process. In the above dialogue between Lee and myself, I explained how autobiography was my first choice as the best methodology for my research. I was so convinced of this that when I

initially came across Loreen N. Olson's (2010) article "The role of voice in the (re)construction of a battered woman's identity: An autoethnography of one woman's experiences of abuse" I did not include it in my research. Her paper resonated with me enough to momentarily question autobiography as my research method. I persevered with the logic that women who have been abused by their intimate partners do not belong to a separate culture from the rest of society.

Upon looking over Olson's paper a second time, opening my mind to the possibility of using autoethnography, I noticed how she reasoned "we are the individuals we are because of the social, political, and interpersonal worlds we inhabit" (2010, p. 3). Olson is referring to the notion of self-concept and how it emerges in part from the people in our lives and how they see us, thus relationships become the cornerstone in the construction of our sense of self. As I read Olson's research, the notion of culture became clear, all human beings are influenced by culture and it is impossible to separate oneself from that cultural stimulus. This realization represents another epiphany. My eyes are now wide open to how oblivious I was to the covert cultural discourses influencing my decisions and thus my experience of male partner violence. I had no idea I was a captive to the societal norms of woman, wife, and mother.

I believe individual perceptions are unique to each one of us. However, we are also influenced by our surroundings: friends, family, society, religion, and politics. Perhaps this is the primary contributing factor to why male partner violence is such a complex phenomenon. It is indeed difficult work, and the challenges of this research can create obstacles. I have been blessed with two supportive supervisors to mentor and assist me on this tempestuous journey. Although I recognize my research as having value, the length of time it is taking to complete is impacting my self-esteem. Can I really present my research (my life and choices I have made) in a meaningful way?

In my search for literature in the plethora of writing on intimate partner violence the link to my lived experience was missing. Muncey posited that many people resort to autoethnography “as a means of getting across intangible and complex feelings and experiences that somehow can’t be told in conventional ways, or because the literature they are reading is not telling their story” (2010, pp. 2-3). Bochner and Ellis (2006) expressed their passion for the evocative nature of autoethnography as a scholarly method:

Autoethnography shows struggle, passion, embodied life, and the collaborative creation of sense-making in situations in which people have to cope with dire circumstances and loss of meaning. Autoethnography wants the reader to care, to feel, to empathize, and to do something, to act. It needs the researcher to be vulnerable and intimate. Intimacy is a way of being, a mode of caring, and it shouldn’t be used as a vehicle to produce distanced theorizing. What are we giving to the people with whom we are intimate, if our higher purpose is to use our joint experiences to produce theoretical abstractions published on the pages of scholarly journals? (p. 433)

My hope is that my research will add a more personal dimension to the available literature on male partner violence. My autoethnographic research is my contribution to considering the implications of this societal phenomenon from a different stance, an entirely personal account. It is important for me to illustrate through stories and art how social pressures influenced my life and in ways that I was unaware of when I began writing.

In this way Muncey’s (2010) point of view is important to deliberate: “If we consider that the dominant voice of the research world is not representing our experience, then we have to find ways of redressing the balance” (p. xi). I find Tessa Muncey’s (2010) description of a rationale for using autoethnography useful for explaining why it fits my research:

It is the complexity of individuals that autoethnography seeks to address; the muddled, idiosyncratic, florid eccentricities that make us unique as opposed to part of a population. The unexamined assumptions that govern everyday life, behaviour and decision making

are as strong as any overt beliefs. The shape and size of these unexamined assumptions can be considered the staple diet of the autoethnographers. (p. xi)

In male partner violence there are many false assumptions that lead to societal stigma, like the assumption that a woman who has experienced male partner violence is weak or asked for it.

Other than Weiss (2004), who wrote about her experience in the first chapter of her book, *Surviving domestic violence: Voices of women who broke free*. I could not find literature to which I could feel a connection and a parallelism to the writer's experience. My aim is to write in a creative and evocative manner that invites connection and parallelism from the reader. I recall feeling ashamed for allowing "such ugliness to happen" (Weiss, 2004, p. 9) as did Weiss and being concerned that friends and colleagues would think less of me. Weiss (2004) described herself as a "strong self-assured woman," (p. 9) so how could she talk about her experience without appearing defective? Was I blind because it took so long for me to genuinely acknowledge that I was in an abusive marriage? I feel a kinship to Weiss as she attempted to clarify "Why it took [her] 8 years, 7 months, and 21 days" (p. 19) to leave her marriage because I continue to unravel why it took me 17 years and 5 days to leave mine. For so long I felt confused and truly believed that I was meant to spend the rest of my life with Reginald. Am I admitting defeat because I walked away from my marriage and broke up my family?

I will never forget hearing Oprah say, "We teach people how to treat us." I wrestled with this concept for many years, trying to figure out what part I played in this truly unhealthy and violent marriage. As I write I continue to disentangle all the reasons I persevered and resisted permanently leaving my marriage. I find solace in Weiss' (2004) statement where she acknowledges that "any woman in an abusive relationship, whether she has remained or managed to get free, is a strong woman" (p. 9). I have come to embrace this belief about all the women I work with, including myself.

Feeling courageous and compelled to tell my story, with an “autobiographical voice” (Pinar, 1997, p. 86), a critical aspect of autoethnographic work, I feel confident to move forward. Benstock (1998) explained how “autobiography reveals gaps, and not only gaps in time and space or between the individual and the social, but also a widening divergence between the manner and matter of its discourse” (p. 146). The autobiographical aspect of autoethnography “reflects the intersection between culture, society, and politics [and includes] multiple subject positions” (Pinar, 1997, p. 86) that are so prevalent in violent relationships. Autoethnography is an “autobiographical genre . . . that displays multiple layers of consciousness connecting the personal and the cultural” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739). Reed-Danahay (1997) suggested the following definition for autoethnography:

[It is] a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context. It is both a method and a text, as in the case of ethnography, [and autoethnography can] be done by an autobiographer who places the story of his or her life within a story of the social context in which it occurs. (p. 9)

The path to finding the best methodology to share my personal story in the context of an arts based approach has involved a shift in course. In spite of this I now truly feel secure that autoethnography is the most fitting methodology for me; it feels comfortable. With autoethnography I can paint a more complete depiction of my experience while acknowledging that my portrayal is scarcely a minute fragment of a much larger societal picture.

Creatively adapting Wolcott’s (1995) concrete definition of ethnography to illustrate autoethnography; Ellis (2004) drew three circles, each intersecting in the middle, to represent autoethnography, autobiography (self), and ethnography (culture). Wolcott had previously used intersecting circles to represent ethnography, art, and science. Ellis clarified how autoethnography is, “a form of ethnography [that] overlaps art and science; it is part *auto* or self

and part *ethno* or culture. It also is something different from both of them, greater than its parts” (p. 32). The three interlocking circles illustrate my story and my art, which are represented in the autobiography (self) circle. The ethnography (culture) circle encapsulates the socio-cultural and historical time frame in which my story takes place. Consequently, the autoethnography circle includes both aspects of the self and culture circles, and yet is much more.

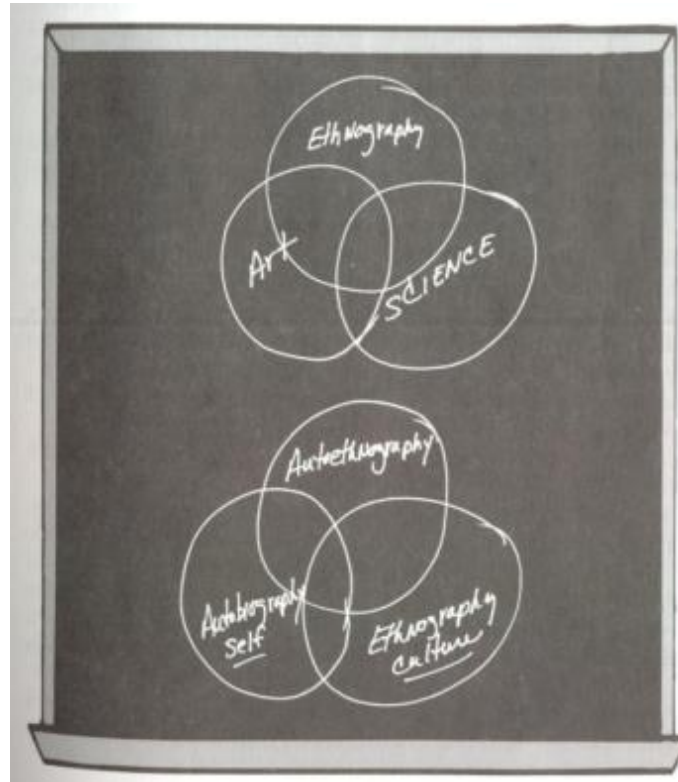


Figure 3: Concrete Definition of Autoethnography.
(Ellis, 2004, p. 31)

I use Richardson’s (2001) words to attempt to explain the much more aspect of the autoethnography circle. She explained how when we write about our “life in writing-stories . . . [we are] . . . experiencing the flow of writing and experiencing connectedness to others. The sense of time and space as separate is undermined, re-understood as deeply interrelated” (Richardson, 2001, pp. 36-37). Through the act of writing one may feel a connection to and with others. As I write, I make sense and find meaning in my lived experience of male partner

violence. I am also opening myself up to the opportunity of “making communion—community—possible” (Richardson, 2001, p. 37). In this form of study as a researcher I am able “to provoke, challenge, and illuminate rather than confirm and settle” (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001, p. 20). There is a synchronicity in using autoethnography to share my story of male partner violence, because it is a societal phenomenon and in autoethnography society is taken into account. Male partner violence affects the women who are abused, the men who abuse, the children entrapped in these families and friends, and family as are bystanders and helping professionals of male partner violence. I keep the reader in mind as I write searching for connections and resonance.

* * *

I share with you a tale about the beginnings of transformation from a point of feeling uncertain about what autoethnography entails to feeling exhilarated by the endless creative possibilities of constructing an autoethnographic text. It is 2012, I am at the Congress of Qualitative Inquiry Conference in Illinois and I am excited about my opportunity to attend Laurel Richardson’s Three Word workshop. Being aware that Laurel Richardson is an accomplished writer, I feel apprehensive and curious about what this workshop will entail. After Laurel introduces herself she begins her workshop;

“There is much work to do and a limited amount of time in this workshop in which to do it and I want you all to have a great writing experience today.”

“Write about a particular 5-year period in your life using three word sentences,” instructs Laurel.

“Do they have to be proper sentences?” one woman asks.

“No, they just need to be three words,” repeats Laurel.

“Does it need to include a verb?” A man inquires.

“Just three words, any three words. It can even be the same three words,” Laurel clarifies. “Now write for 15 minutes.”

Somehow my hearing is a bit fuzzy and I begin writing three-word sentences about a ten-year span in my life beginning with my first pregnancy. I am surprised at how easily the words flow onto the paper.

I am pregnant. And now what? Do I dare? Do I care? Am I alone? Will I cope? Life is beautiful. Love is personification? How can it? A new life. I feel love. Deepest love ever. So much love. So much responsibility. Responsibility me how? Now I sit. Sit for hours. And more hours. And hum sing. Sing for love. So much love. Exhausted and drained. Confused and tired. So how confused. Overwhelmed and anxious. Go on anyway. Pretend away troubles. Life so full. Full of love. Full of troubles. Life is wondrous. Life is scary. Scary and wondrous? How can it? Really so conflicted. Go on still. Love my daughter. Disgusted with life. Life is twisted. Cruel and uncaring. Cruel and uncertain. Move out alone. Alone with child. So much love. So much hatred. So much loneliness. So much sorrow. So much confusion. So much worry. So little money. Alone and happy. Moving forward together. Together mother, daughter. Beautiful perfect daughter. Life is good. I am mom. Am I good? Enough am I? So pure innocent. Innocence fractured damaged. Still so loveable. So brave daughter. Life goes on. Together again again. Why together now? Another beautiful daughter. So sad lonely. So much responsibility. Two lovely daughters. Again together why? Apart once again. So completely terrified. Terrified and lonely. Lonely and tired. So completely exhausted. Not together again! Dysfunctional and

afraid. Not my family. Not my dream. Another beautiful daughter. Dream come true.

Three amazing daughters!

"Time to stop," Laurel interrupts, as we are all fervently writing.

"It was a slow start, but then I just kept writing and writing. I still have so much more to say," one woman shares. My thoughts echo her words.

Laurel appears pleased but not surprised by our enthusiasm. "Okay. Now using the same time frame and continuing to use three-word sentences, write about what was happening in the world. You have the same amount of time, so begin writing," Laurel advises.

I find this a little tougher, but I begin to write. I choose to move back and forth between my emotional state and my limited awareness of what is happening in the world.

World transforming technologically. So much knowledge. Knowledge and technology.

Friends graduating university. Friends becoming doctors. Computers becoming common.

Advancement in information. Charles married Diana. Television viewing growing. More sexualized television. Cell phone common. Innovative production explored. Production in

agriculture. Innovation in communications. Difficulty remembering outside. Outside of myself. So much turmoil. Outside world unimportant. Unimportant yet influential.

Feeling left behind. Loss of connection. Connection to world. World changing fast. World

affecting children. My life affected. Affected by change. Oblivious to change. Changed anyway however. Always changing learning. Being influenced growing. World

exploration technology. Technology huge impact. Life with much. Much contact with.

Feel left behind. Not a part. Transformation outside me. In the world. Apart from world.

In and out. Apart and distanced, Informed and clueless. Lost and alone. Beyond my

grasp. All this technology. So much money. So much education. Left behind education.

Apart from world. Fast paced world. World without borders. Internet connections common. Connected to world. Disconnected to world. Does world matter? Do I fit? Will I fit? Find a place. A new cellphone. All my own. On my own. All alone finally. In new world. Full of technology. Connect to world. Educate myself technologically. Computers now common. Common but expensive. Beyond my reach.

“Okay everyone, time to stop. So how was that for you?” she asks. Once again I surprise myself by the vast amount I write in a short period of time.

“I really struggled with recalling world events during this period of my life,” one woman admits. I feel comforted that I am not the only one who found it hard to connect with the outside world during this ten year period of my life.

Once again the room echoes, “Yah, me too.”

However, one woman asserts, “During this difficult time in my life, being tuned into significant world events distracted me from focusing on the problems I faced in my personal life.”

“Okay, that’s interesting, but generally, when we are experiencing trauma in our lives, we are so immersed in it that the idea pulling ourselves out long enough to pay attention to world events seems like a momentous task,” Laurel explains and then adds, “It is a luxury to know about the world”.

I feel relieved and validated by this. I have often felt clueless because I was so unaware of world events. My life was in a state of trauma for a very long time.

Now I have the opportunity to consider how world events during this time in my life have influenced my personal life. Also about the culture of women who live with and leave male partner violence and the messages that society gives them and assumes they are all the same (all

from a particular culture) rather than understanding that each situation is unique and that society's messages increase the issues of an already difficult life. Society is uncomfortable with the rawness and vulnerability of certain individual personal stories. Stories of male partner violence are silenced and not to be shared.

The accepted societal practice of keeping private affairs secret was disrupted with the emergence of feminism. Many of us are apprehensive about acknowledging the mess behind closed doors. It is easier to assume women who experience male partner are somehow different or defective than to look for connections. Feminism and autoethnography look for interconnections. Ron Pelias (2004) writes about seeking resonance with others in search of building relationships within our society.

* * *

At the 2012 Innovations in Qualitative Research Conference in Saskatoon, I have the pleasure to meet privately with Dr. Ron Pelias, an author, poet, researcher, and professor of Speech Communication at Southern Illinois University. He is a tall, soft-spoken man with a gentle demeanour, medium frame, and greying hair. When I share my research topic with him, he offers sage advice: "Focus on the recovery of a family and speak to the tensions about what is out there and what is lived" (R. Pelias, personal communication, June 11, 2012). Societal assumptions and reactions compared to what it is really like. Society says the best thing is to leave. "Just leave" is the status quo answer to women in the midst of male partner violence.

Our time is short, 15 minutes. He shares a final tip: "Think about and identify cultural influences. When you think about the 'should's' in your life that kept you in the marriage as well as the 'should's' that influenced your children's lives and yours, think about which of these 'should's' are cultural" (R. Pelias, personal communication, June 11, 2012). I think about my

shoulds and begin to conclude that they were society's should's as well: I *should* stay in my marriage forever; I *should* understand when Reginald is having a *bad day*; I *should* keep my family together; I *should* find a way to make us all happy; and I *should* be good enough.

Dr. Ron Pelias shares how:

Writing about ourselves and others is always a cultural act, a doing with consequence. Writing always carries a pedagogical construction which must be done with an ethic of care and hope. The purpose of writing is to disturb, to allow these difficult issues a chance to settle in our gut, so we as autoethnographers strive to focus on societal issues in the world that need to be addressed . . . as researchers we always need to ask ourselves, what work our research accomplishes . . . We hope our work will be productive, and at first the most we can hope for is a small ripple at best, but when enough voices come together, that ripple can gain greater and greater force. (R. Pelias, keynote speaker, Innovations in Qualitative Research, June 12, 2012)

Pelias (2004) described autoethnography as seeking resonance “in search of the nexus of self and culture” (p. 11). I come away with the realization of how interconnected I am with the sociocultural the sociopolitical world I live in. My story is shaped by my environment. Meeting Dr. Ron Pelias has opened my mind to this reality. I take this opportunity to show some of my writing along with a copy of my silkscreen to Dr. Pelias.

* * *

Dear Sherrie,

Thanks for sharing your piece--both your art and your writing are truly engaging. I love how you take the reader into your topic as an entry into your research. You have keen ear for dialogue and a wonderful sense of being present to your reader. Keep writing--you are doing important work! You have much to offer.

Ron

* * *

Sharing my personal experience of male partner violence is more personal than hearing statistics because it confronts taboo topics and reveals secrets. Pelias (2004) described how the

“literature that makes the writer and readers take notice not just of its points but also its aesthetic presentation . . . depends upon the creative and finds its force in the imaginative” (p. 12).

Although each life is unique, art and stories offer the opportunity to discover ‘me too’ insights and celebrate similarities of human experience (Pelias, 2004). Art is viewed and interpreted by the viewer. While this interpretation may coincide with the artist’s intended portrayal it may also reveal an alternate perspective. This unexpected viewpoint could prove meaningful to the viewer in a way that the artist could not foresee. This is one of the wonders or marvels of creative endeavours utilizing artwork and stories. Autoethnographic work shows a certain finesse as I am able to guide myself “through time and space to reveal how cultural logics enable and constrain” (Pelias, 2004, p. 11). My work seeks resonance.

Breaking the silence of male partner violence begins by telling one story. Abrahams (2010) voiced how breaking the silence is about prevention; putting a stop to the harm to others living with the shame and silence of male partner violence. Poulos (2009) so aptly articulated, “I want to show you a way to transfigure silence into talk that counts” (p. 16). Ellis (2004) indicated that using autoethnography as a method, “provides an avenue for doing something meaningful for yourself and the world” (p. xviii). Giorgio (2009) wrote about her own experience of abuse where she unearthed the multiple layers of recovering from trauma. During her own healing process Giorgio (2009) made a discovery, “We assert our own order onto the mess of trauma; we regain control over our lives by acknowledging and sharing with others our own truths” (p. 151). Keeping in mind that truth is always positioned in a particular moment in time. Sharing my truth with others in a domestic violence support group environment proved to be healing.

Now in writing about my personal trauma I feel a sense of inner-peace as I reemerge myself in past trauma. And I believe “When writing to heal ourselves, we help others heal. In doing so, we can make our personal political” (Giorgio, 2009, p. 151). Ellis and Bochner (2006) described their “enthusiasm for autoethnography was instigated by a desire to move ethnography away from the gaze of the distanced and detached observer and toward the embrace of intimate involvement, engagement, and embodied participation” (pp. 433-434) which involves taking the risk as a researcher to become vulnerable. I believe using autoethnography as my methodology can expose my vulnerability by addressing my shame. By putting a voice to my experience of living with and leaving male partner violence so others may begin to understand and develop empathy for the human condition.

I believe this is what Pelias (2004) refers to when he speaks of empathic scholarship. While we recognize our own uniqueness, an opportunity is created for connection, identification, and a witnessing of commonality. “Both, [he states], require a taking in, a knowing and a feeling” (Pelias, p. 12). “Autoethnography is one of the approaches that acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don't exist” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011, p. 2). Being self-aware and self-reflective throughout this research provides me a new vantage point to view past decisions and choices in my life. I was confronted with many choices such as; continuing to stay in an unhappy marriage, returning to this unhealthy marriage, and leaving to raise three children on my own. In exposing my vulnerability and perspective, I hope others may find insight into their own or others circumstance.

I have found how difficult and uncomfortable it is to write about trauma. “The act of self-discovery and analysis is confusing and loaded with meaning and consequences” (Giorgio, 2009,

p. 151) and going back to write about past trauma is distressing work. It is also difficult and sometimes awkward for the reader as they are guided through an autoethnographic account to see, hear, taste, smell, and touch what the writer is conveying through evocative stories, poetry, or artwork. It is human nature to look away in the face of unpleasant conditions that exist in the world. In autoethnography creative expressions offer varied venues to view the rigors inherent in life.

Although writing autoethnography about male partner violence in an evocative manner is an intimidating endeavor, I am inspired to find others who have pioneered the way. Sophie Tamas (2011) wrote, *Life after leaving: The remains of spousal abuse*. Being inspired by Sophie's autoethnographic work I relay my admiration of her in an e-mail:

You are a pioneer in this area as I am sure you are aware. I have so much respect for your courage and honesty, Sophie.

Respectfully, Sherrie

Her book is playful and evocative, written as a play of her life and includes fictitious conversations with various authors and researchers in trauma and domestic violence, such as Ellis (2002), Herman (1997), Kearney (2001), van der Kolk & van der Hart (1995), and Wuest & Merritt-Gray (1999). It is exciting for me to know that Sophie developed this book from her doctoral dissertation entitled *Playing the survivor: How (and if) women recover from spousal abuse* (2010). Finding autoethnographic work about male partner violence is difficult because not many authors have written autobiographical accounts, so when I came across Sophie's work I was thrilled. She had not only written an autobiographical narrative of her experience, she wrote an autoethnographical exploration of recovering from the trauma of male partner violence.

Other than Tamas (2011), the only other autoethnographic account of male partner violence I came across was an article Olson (2010) wrote entitled, "The role of voice in the

(re)construction of a battered woman's identity: An autoethnography of one woman's experiences of abuse" in *Women's Studies in Communication*. Weiss (2004) wrote, *Surviving domestic violence: Voices of women who broke free*, devoting the first chapter to her story of breaking free from abuse. She has also written two other books (dedicated to family, friends, and community members) on how to be helpful to someone in an abusive relationship. White (2011) wrote a book entitled, *A safe place for women: Surviving domestic abuse and creating a successful future*, devoting her first two chapters to her personal experience. I was so excited to find her book that I purchased a copy for myself. While other authors have disclosed having experienced male partner violence, to my disappointment, minimal personal stories are revealed (Kendrick, 1998; and Mills, 1998). Why is it important to have more personal narratives? Weiss (2004) so eloquently heralded that in order "to grasp the full reality of domestic abuse, it must be approached, like a piece of sculpture, from multiple vantage points" (p. 5). In this way each story adds vital pieces in creating a comprehensive monument.

* * *

There are risks involved in conducting autoethnographic research. Ellis (2004) stated that although researchers hope that their work will be enlightening for readers, the reality is that in writing about our lives, "we open ourselves up for criticism about how we've lived" (p. 34). I have lost count of how many times I have been asked, "Why did you stay for so long?" and "why on earth did you go back?" When I share some of the bizarre details of the abuse in my marriage, often there is a quick change of topic. Hearing about male partner violence is awkward. When I tell my story, it "Imposes a burden on the listener. Stories demand as they give, because listeners are integral to the storytelling process. Listening to stories is not a passive act. The listener becomes the story, and so the story lives on" (Weiss, 2004, p. 10).

Therefore a great deal of discomfort is inevitable when conducting this personal research. It is understandable, therefore, that there is “usually some degree of emotional turmoil [that] accompanies the vulnerability required to scrutinize [oneself] and reveal to others what [is] found” (Ellis, 2004, p. xx). Ellis acknowledged how writing autoethnography will almost certainly be a painful process. Thus, she said, “Almost always, the insights you gain about yourself and the world around you make the pain bearable, even welcome at times” (Ellis, 2004, p. xx). Richardson (2009) also confessed how “Some stories are painful and take an interminable length of time to write” (p. 5). This has been intensely true for me. A benefit I have found is that through the writing process the monopoly these painful stories have on me fades (Richardson, 2009).

In this autoethnographical study of my experience of male partner violence I have an opportunity to create connection to all who read my research. Alas, reading my intimate portrayal may leave the reader feeling uneasy. The goal of eliciting discomfort in autoethnographical writing is to challenge the status quo and elicit societal change (Pelias, 2012). I hope to challenge societal perceptions about women who have lived with and/or left male partner violence, these women, as am I, are not defective or responsible for the violence incurred. I believe altering societal norms begins with the simple yet powerful shift of speaking up, refusing to be a bystander, and being intolerant to a woman being demeaned in any way. Keeling and van Wormer (2012) noted how professionals often contribute to the oppression of women. “We should never treat [women] as powerless beings but rather we need to respect their personal choice and agency” proclaimed Keeling and van Wormer (p. 1368). It is vital for helping professionals to practice empathy for the women they assist to begin a societal shift toward eliminating stigma.

I write about my personal struggles of living with and leaving abuse in the hope of humanizing a societal phenomenon. Although many of my stories are difficult to read in terms of fairness, justice, and reasonableness my goal is for my stories to be plausible. So then the issue of verisimilitude, meaning depicting realism as something probable, comes into play. Ellis (2004) proposed that as long as our work “evokes in readers a feeling that the experience described is lifelike, believable, and possible,” (p. 124) it has validity. When writing about my life, I rely on journals, court transcripts, and my memory to depict stories that portray my experience. Bochner (2007) articulated “I cannot write about events in my past if I don’t remember them” (p. 198) because relying on one’s memory can pose problems. As Goodall (2000) stated, “what counts as the truth depends on where you are standing” (p. 12). I recognize that my truth is filtered through my recollection of traumatic events so I use my journal entries and court transcripts to ground “my memory to arrive at some truth” (Bochner, 2007, p. 198).

Bochner (2000) emphasized how, “Too often, personal narratives are demeaned as some sort of victim art or confessional” (p. 271). When we respond hastily and this view is taken we often neglect “how narrative is issued as a source of empowerment and a form of resistance to counter the domination of canonical discourses” (Bochner, 2000, p. 271). Telling my story is important but my research is much more than self-indulgence or simply a tell-all shocking account. Kauffman (1993) warned of the danger involved in personal testimony because it has the potential to lead to “narcissism and personal passivity instead of inspiring political action and social change” (p. 264). Kauffman’s food for thought reminds me that I need to be constantly aware of my motives for sharing my story. Political and societal changes are important to consider when addressing male partner violence because it is perpetuated by societal views and attitudes.

Many of the stories I share are wrought with irrationalities and absurdities but they are indubitably true to the best of my recollection. However, I have also discovered how truth is always situated in the context of time. As I write these words, I recognize how what I viewed as the truth at one point in time, no longer holds true for me. Contemplating the period of my life with Reginald, I now clearly see how completely embedded I was in the sociocultural norms of being a good wife and mother. Although I may not recall each detail with acute accuracy, I do remember the emotionality of the episodes in these stories. In a personal communication Denzin (2006) rationalized how the “truth in life writing involves a writer’s relationship to an experience and, as such, becomes constructed and mediated in the creation of text” (as cited in Tullis Owen, 2009, p. 185). Denzin added how truth can be challenged because it is often subjective or biased, and it is imperfect (as cited in Tullis Owen, 2009). Ellis asserted that validity is judged by “whether it helps readers communicate with others different from themselves or offers a way to improve the lives of the participants and readers—or even your own” (2009, p. 124). My intent is to impart this emotionality with you through my evocative writing of these events in my life so that you as the reader may come closer to appreciating the complexities of living with and leaving abuse.

Richardson and Lockridge (2004) used the construct of crystallization to illustrate and explain truth and validity. They proposed that “Crystallization provides us with a deepened, complex, and thoroughly partial understanding of the topic” (p. 963) because of its many facets and vantage points. Richardson (2008) advised how there are many ways of seeing the truth. She described validity by using the concept of crystallize:

Crystallization, without losing structure, deconstructs the traditional idea of ‘validity’; we feel how there is no single truth, and we see how texts validate themselves.

Paradoxically, we know more and doubt what we know. Ingeniously, we know there is always more to know. (p. 479)

Each of my stories depicts a particular facet of male partner violence. In some cases I tell the same story over again from a perspective different from the previous so that the reader may be presented with more than one side to the story.

My artwork serves as yet another vantage point to view male partner violence, through different eyes, other than my own. My hope is that when reading my stories and viewing my artwork you will feel this sense of my truth. Pelias (2004) described how “the heart learns that stories are the truths that won’t keep still. There is always another version, another eye to tell what it sees, another voice ready to speak” (p. 171). I am able to use various expressive tools to tell my tale from different vantage points, a significant benefit of using autoethnography as my methodology.

Although I lived with male partner violence and left that life behind many years ago, I have learned much about myself through the iterative process of writing. I continue to mature and evolve as a woman. Richardson pointed out “Writing is a way of knowing . . . [writing] is a method of discovery and analysis” (p. 516). Giorgio (2009) discovered a fundamental process of research writing derived as a result of finding new meanings as we write and in turn writing about those new meanings. The process of writing and editing ultimately creates more text/ data. This hermeneutic circle spirals into a transformative experience of writing, gaining new insights, learning, researching and creating once again as I continue to write about and analyze my lived experience. Giorgio shared her struggle as she revealed her “lived experience of real trauma” and determining “Which truth to tell? Is mine the only truth? Did this really happen? Will my reader believe me?” (2009, p. 150) I struggle with the same issues, which story will best relay what my life with abuse was like? Will these stories resonate with the reader?

Pelias (2004) enlightened us how “embracing truthful contingencies makes responsible life writing possible” (p. 196). Davis and Ellis (2008) decided “Fictionalization is sometimes the ethical choice” (p. 114). They further discussed how when “some details or characters are changed it allows ‘others’ in my narratives some measure of anonymity or deniability” (Davis & Ellis, 2008, p. 114). While I am telling my story using my actual name I protect others in my stories by using pseudonyms. Davis (2008) questioned, “Isn’t it more ethical to do that, than insist my version of the story is the ‘correct’ one? [The reality is], “there is no *one* ‘Truth’ ” (p. 114). Autoethnographic research creates text as a result of analysis of multiple expressive tools such as, my stories, personal journals, court documents, artwork, and photographs. Although I use court transcripts and journal entries to depict the truth I also acknowledge that I am the one deciphering the meaning of these documents. Others may recall events in my story differently.

Ellis (2004) aptly described the creativity involved in autoethnographical research. She explained that by “combining literary and ethnographic techniques, [it is possible to] create a story to engage readers in methodological concerns in the same way a novel engages readers in a plot” (p. xx). Denzin and Lincoln (2002) highlighted how a wide array of creative forms is available to autoethnographers to showcase their research, including “short stories, poetry, fiction and creative non-fiction, photographic essays, personal essays, narratives of the self, writing stories, fragmented, layered texts, critical autobiography, and co-constructed performance narratives” (p. 71). I use stories, dialogue, poetry, photographs, silkscreen print, pen and ink self-portrait and a co-constructed fictional conversation piece between my supervisor, Lee and myself. These varied creative forms focus on the many facets of my experience of living with and leaving male partner violence. These multiple perspectives offer the reader an array of opportunities to connect with my personal experience.

I began breaking the silence of my experience of living with and leaving male partner violence when I created my silkscreen and I want to continue to break the silence. It opened a door that I entered with trepidation but once I walked through this door there was no turning back. I had been pulled into telling my story and once I found autoethnography I embraced this journey to portray how complex it is to live with and leave abuse. It is vital that I disrupt the silence around speaking openly about male partner violence because in our societal framework, “violence against women in Canada is a serious, pervasive problem that crosses every social boundary and affects communities across the country” (Sinha, Statistics Canada, 2013, p. 3).

Violence “remains a significant barrier to women’s equality [while also having] devastating impacts on the lives of women, children, families and Canadian society as a whole” (Sinha, 2013, p. 3). Through a feminist way of viewing male partner violence I weave through the sociocultural and sociopolitical tapestry that entwines women into a life of domination. Issues such as socioeconomic disadvantage, psychological pathology, children’s reactions to the violence, and religion are also revealed to expose some of the complexities of living with and leaving male partner violence.

CHAPTER 3: Weaving and Unraveling: The Sociocultural and Sociopolitical Tapestry



Figure 4: Wedding Day, October 17, 1981.

Colour photograph. 10 x 8 (25.4 x 20.32). Saskatchewan.

As I gaze out the window, I wonder what I thinking on the morning of my wedding day? Standing in the colour coordinated living room of my childhood home, I see now how innocent I was at twenty-years-old. Finding the perfect dress to be married in was a priority, and since I played dress-up in my mom's wedding gown one too many times, I needed to find one just like it. I searched until I found a close replica of this cherished dress that somehow symbolized the sacred bond my parents shared with each other. I longed for a special love in my own life so much; I was sure I found this in my union with Reginald.

* * *

A Fairytale: Beauty, is written in a storytelling format, and was composed by myself for the Family Service Saskatoon's Annual Report 2009-10 about the Abuse and Beyond Group. This story depicts the dream of true love and how that fantasy fades when violence enters into an intimate partner relationship.

Once upon a time there was a young girl. Now this young girl was not unlike many other young girls, who loved to dream. She would often find herself on a patch of green grass, lying down and staring up at the sky. Many times she would see many different types of animals in the clouds and she would dream about her life as a woman. She was sure that her life would be a fairy tale full of adventure, wonder, and love. She had watched many Disney movies about happily ever after and how the prince would save the princess from a fire breathing dragon. The prince would fall madly in love with the princess after they shared their first kiss, true love's kiss. The princess would breathe deep and sigh when she thought of how safe she felt in his arms. Now this young girl had watched Beauty and the Beast so she knew that sometimes the prince could be grouchy and maybe even roar but underneath that rough exterior was a gentle and loving prince, afraid that he may lose her.

Years had passed and this young girl became a young woman who found the man of her dreams. He was kind and gentle most of the time but sometimes he scared her a little. He did after all have a very loud roar and would sometimes even smash things

much like the beast in the movie she had seen as a child. She was convinced; however, that if she just loved him enough he would not be afraid of losing her. While she loved him so much she also felt confused and afraid.

More years passed and she was weary, lonely, and afraid almost all the time. She found the courage to leave the man of her dreams because their children were often afraid and sad. But how would she make it on her own? She could not help but wonder if he would be okay. She had after all promised him she would love him forever and always.

One day someone told her about a group she could go to where other women who felt the same way she did went to support each other and share their stories. These strong women were courageous yet they were confused and sad. She came to Family Service Saskatoon in the Saskatoon Community Service Village to meet with the facilitator of the group for an interview. She was so afraid but when she sat in the room with this woman she felt safe and wept as she told her story. When she left she felt encouraged and she even felt a sense of hope, something she had not felt in a very long time.

The time came to go to group and although she was afraid she continued to feel a sense of hope. She sat in the room, a room full of women who had all experienced the same loss of a dream. She was not alone. She could now begin to imagine a new dream for herself and her children.

* * *

Much like the woman in the story I was looking for my knight in shining armour. A man who would love me, cherish me, and keep me safe forever and always. In this chapter I invite you to walk with me and take a closer look at male partner violence through my eyes, as I deliberate the critical moments and crossroads of my life. While I attempt to create order, the reality is there are so many layers that overlap, intertwine, and interconnect into a messy cluster.

I persist in exploring the various themes in the convoluted nature of living with, and leaving male partner violence. I consider what kept me in an abusive marriage for so long, the dynamics of abuse during pregnancy, why I returned to the marriage on two occasions, the critical event that led to my final departure, and how I stayed away despite my values, societal

stigma, shame, and situational poverty. In this chapter, I weave back and forth through time and space to illustrate the legitimately knotty affair inherent in living with, and leaving male partner violence. I use journals and excerpts from court transcripts to ground my thoughts through this turbulent period of my life and to aid in the recall of many troubling and incomprehensible events of this time. I use my actual name as a means of reclaiming my voice and owning my story. As I delve into the pain and trauma, there are moments when my memory is fragmented and torn by time and emotionality.

Autoethnography is a form of qualitative research which values personal interpretation. These are my subjective accounts therefore I can't remain unbiased. In my quest for peace and clarity I work toward self-understanding so I may celebrate, nurture, and grow. Although personal growth is one of my goals for this research, change as a process can be unpleasant. This research represents my initial 'dipping of my toe' into the pool of taboo issues related to male partner violence.

I recognize these taboo issues as I read the literature and I notice varying terms used to describe domestic violence: wife abuse and wife battery denote abuse and physical violence from a husband toward his wife; domestic abuse, domestic violence, intimate terrorism, and intimate partner violence all signify abuse in the context of an intimate relationship with no identification of the perpetrator's gender; male partner violence denotes both the gender of the perpetrator and the intimate nature of the relationship. While the term wife abuse represents the abuse of a woman by her husband, it excludes intimate cohabitation relationships and focuses on the recipient rather than the offender. Also the term abuse is vague, simply conveying mistreatment as opposed to the violent reality of the relationship. Although wife battery implies a marriage bond, it is not always an inappropriate term because it implies physical violence only; other types

of abuse are also commonly experienced, with or without physical violence, such as psychological, sexual, and emotional abuse and financial deprivation (Shipway, 2004). I describe my own experience as violence within an intimate cohabitation relationship, in my case marriage, with the man using violence toward a woman; therefore I will use the term *male partner violence* as it includes abuse at all levels.

There is never any justification for abuse. Lundy Bancroft (2002) described how a need for control is about an abuse of power. Bancroft's definition of abuse aptly fits for the purpose of this thesis:

The term *abuse* is about power; it means that a person is taking advantage of a power imbalance to exploit or control someone else. Whenever power imbalances exist, such as between men and women, or adults and children, or between rich and poor, some people will take advantage of those circumstances for their own purposes. . . . Thus the defining point of abuse is when the man starts to exercise power over the woman in a way that causes harm to her and creates a privileged status for him. (2002, pp. 124-125)

* * *

The first six years of our marriage were a happy time. I loved my work at the florist shop, my life as a farm wife, and my husband. I would dutifully lay his clothes out every morning, complete with clean underwear and socks. I would buy farm machinery parts with pride during my lunch break while I was working in the city, and then I would rush home after work to help wherever needed. I was also responsible for preparing the meals, and cleaning/taking care of the house. I was in complete servitude of Reginald; his needs were my primary concern. When it was just the two of us, I was comfortable with this arrangement. The idea of domestic violence was completely foreign to me at this point. I had no idea how dramatically my life was about to change. It changed when I became a mother.

The inception of matrimonial violence

My internal mommy alarm initially chimes softly and tenderly but gradually becomes an ache. I am 25 years old, Reginald and I have been married for 5 years, and I feel ready to start a family with Reginald. The topic of children had come up when we were dating. I was sure four children was the ideal, just like in both of our nuclear families. Reginald continually teased me about his intention to have a dozen children. Although he was joking, I genuinely believed this comment indicated that children were a part of our destiny. 'When the time was right we would talk about how many' I thought to myself. As time went on I decide I don't want to wait anymore.

"I am no longer willing to take the pill; I'm ready to have children." I inform Reginald. We have been married for six years.

A short time after, Reginald is driving me to the airport to catch a flight to Vancouver. I have been working for the same employer for over six years who is willing to pay for a course in advanced floral design and the flight. Finances are not an issue as a relative living in Vancouver has invited me to stay so I have free accommodations. I began this drive feeling energized and excited just thinking about receiving more training. I love being a floral designer.

"I am not ready to have children yet" announces Reginald piercing my bliss and tranquility.

"I've been thinking about you wanting children Sherrie," Reginald continues, "I just can't picture myself with children, now or ever."

"Maybe you are feeling nervous," I suggest.

"Seriously Sherrie, I don't want children," Reginald says in a higher pitch, I recognize he is becoming agitated.

“If you go and get yourself pregnant, I will have nothing to do with you or the baby,” he threatens. He shakes his finger in my face as he speaks.

My mind goes blank. I feel numb. I become aware of my breathing remaining silent as my eyes fill with tears. The rest of the drive is deafeningly quiet.

What a poignant synchronism! My enthusiasm in attending a fully funded floral design course paired with the devastating revelation that my husband does not want to have children. During the flight to Vancouver, I cannot let go of Reginald’s words “I just can’t picture myself with children, now or ever.” These questions resound: He doesn’t want to have children? How could I be so blind? How could I have missed it? What will I do? I am really ready to start a family, to be a mother. We said vows and promised to raise our children in the Catholic Church. Having his children was to be a personification of our love for each other.

In shock I temporarily stop thinking about this cosmic schism. During my two weeks in Vancouver, Reginald and I rarely speak on the phone.

Disquietingly, on the flight home I notice my breasts are feeling unusually tender. I wonder ‘could this be a sign that I am pregnant?’ I note that my menstrual cycle is a bit late and my body is feeling foreign. The plane lands and Reginald is nowhere to be seen. I wonder if he somehow figured out that I am pregnant. But how could he? I am not even sure. I notice my heart is beating a little faster . . . I feel anxious.

As I collect my luggage, I continue to keep an eye out for Reginald; when I don’t see him I assume that he is waiting outside in the parking lot. I begin searching for him through the vast expanse of the parking lot with luggage in tow, weeping softly at first until my eyes overflow with tears. Running frantically up and down the rows and rows of cars for more than an hour, I do not find Reginald. I search every inch of the parking lot.

Feeling utterly desperate I hysterically phone my uncle who lives in the city to plead with him to check if any traffic accidents had been reported on the news.

"There have been no accidents reported. I am sure he will show up," he reassures me.

Reginald appears. He seems calm. I am elated that he is alive, but I can't help but wonder why he is so late. I get in the car.

"Where were you? My plane landed over two hours ago," I say in a soft voice.

"I don't know what your problem is. I'm here when you told me to be here," he responds in a louder than normal voice.

Sensing that he is irritated, I softly reply, "I was worried."

"Why would you worry? I was having coffee with Jake."

I do not respond. I am trembling, but I attempt to regain my composure.

Time passes on our quiet journey home as I try to find the best way to tell him.

I softly say, "I might be pregnant."

"Are you sure?" He asks with a sense of urgency. "How do you know?"

"I don't know for sure, but I am feeling different. I am not sure," I say in an attempt to explain.

"Well there's no sense worrying about it until we know for sure," he suggests.

"What if I am?" I ask nervously through my tears.

"When we get home make an appointment with the doctor," he advises.

That is the last we speak on our sombre drive home. Exhausted, I fall asleep.

The next day in the doctor's office, I receive confirmation. I have been seeing this doctor for more than ten years, and he knows me well.

"Congratulations, Sherrie! You are going to have a baby."

I begin to cry.

“Everything okay?” The doctor asks, looking confused.

“I’m not sure my husband wants a baby,” I whimper through my tears.

“He will be happy,” the doctor says in attempt to reassure me.

I want to be ecstatic. I yearn to be a mother with every fibre of my being; I am ready. I repress the blissful feelings frolicking inside me impatiently waiting for the cue that it is safe to burst into song. I repress my joy because I am terrified that Reginald will follow through with his threat to leave me to raise the baby alone. During my long drive home to the farm, I cry and pray that Reginald will be happy when I tell him.

I walk into the house and announce, “Its official. We are going to have a baby.”

“Okay, we will deal with it. I just don’t want anyone to know. I need time to think,” he decides.

“I really want to tell my family and your family they will be so happy for us. Can I?” I hopefully request.

“No. absolutely not! I forbid you from telling anyone.” He bellows. “I told you, I need time to think. My life will change so much. Don’t tell anyone,” Reginald sternly warns me. He forbids me from telling a soul and I don’t ask why, dreading that my questions would shatter the fragile peace. I feel both confused and relieved. Does this mean I can stay? We can be a family? Why does he have so much power over me? I am employed full-time and abundantly capable of raising a child on my own, so why am I so full of fear?

Maybe my fear is due to the societal attitudes towards young single mothers, which are powerful and demoralizing. Neighbours, people in town may think: I am sentencing my child to a life of poverty. Common stereotypes portray children living with a single mother tend to be

unsuccessful in school and typically get into trouble in and outside of school because children need a father. I will likely be blamed for my failed marriage due to my inability to keep Reginald satisfied. Single mothers are also assumed to be absentee parents due to working long hours (Conan, 2011). There are so many stigmas attached to me being a single mom. I certainly don't want to become one of 'those' mothers. How do I wrap my head around this unforeseen challenge? I am a young married woman faced with the predicament of raising a child on my own.

Belkin (2011) wrote an article in the *New York Times* about what a normal family looks like in our current society. She divulged that "statistically, it is no longer a mother, a father and their biological children living under one roof" (para. 1). A random study involving 2,691 adults in the United States asked whether the new trends in what defines a family were "good, bad or of no consequence to society" (para. 2). It was noted that there is a general move to acceptance of a new and changing family structure. The glaring exceptions included single mothers and gay and lesbian couples. Forty-three percent voted that it is bad for society to have gay and lesbian parents raising children, and sixty-nine percent voted it is bad for society that mothers raise children without male partners. Reading this I felt sad and discouraged because single mothers face so much judgment from society. In reality having the courage to raise children alone in a healthy happy environment is one of my proudest accomplishments even though parenting alone was never the plan or part of the dream.

Feeling tenuous about my marriage and what my future holds, I keep my pregnancy concealed, even though I inwardly want to rejoice. I am so full of love and affection for this new life growing inside me. I love my baby, but I cannot share this love with any other person. So with the volume cranked, I sing out loud to my favourite Amy Grant cassette as I drive my little

blue Capri to work. In this way, I audibly celebrate newfound love, alone, for about an hour every day in the safety of my car.

* * *

When writing this story, I realize I spent too many years thinking I must have missed obvious clues regarding Reginald's lack of desire to father children. Did my youth make me naïve to trust that he would one day be ready for children? Was I a fool to believe him when he said he wanted a dozen children? Before our Catholic marriage ceremony, we were directly asked the following question: "Will you accept children lovingly from God, and bring them up according to the law of Christ and His Church?" We both answered, "I will." When I answered this question I had given thought to having children with Reginald, in fact I looked forward to raising our children together in the Catholic faith. I assumed he felt the same way.

* * *

When I think about this now my thoughts wander into the courtroom, where Reginald provided his testimony regarding tension in our marriage and having children. He is questioned by his lawyer Mervin Kemp. I recall the interchange and how surreal it all seems now. For the purpose of confidentiality I reference the transcript as Q. B. Div. No. 711, 2001.

Q- Mervin Kemp—So, now, let's talk about where the differences seem to arise, Reginald. And that seems to be when she became pregnant with Dianthus. Your thoughts on having children and the pregnancy?

A- Reginald—I guess I was scared of the responsibility. I had had two cousins that had little kids, one run over by a tractor and one by a car. I was terrified of the responsibility. I was scared of that. I did want kids, but it was as if I stood at the edge of a swimming pool and kind of had to be pushed into it. I was somewhat reluctant.

Q- Okay. And then Sherrie did tell you somewhere in the summer of 1987 that she was expecting, and your reaction to that pregnancy?

A- When she initially told me, I got scared and flipped out, but it was only once. And I needed time to think about it.

Q- And then, after that?

A- I just needed time for it to sink in, and I didn't want to just expose it to the whole neighbourhood. It was something that we could just keep between ourselves for a while (Q. B. Div. No. 711 485- 486, 2001).

* * *

In the courtroom Reginald testified "I got scared and flipped out" (Q. B. Div. No. 711 486, 2001) when he found out I was pregnant. Interesting how I recall this so differently, my memory takes me back to the drive to the airport when Reginald threatened me while informing me that he had no intention of becoming a father, before he even knew I was pregnant. Every time I read "I didn't want to just expose it to the whole neighbourhood" (Q. B. Div. No. 711 486, 2001) I feel hurt, and betrayed. Expose implies that I have done something wrong; that he is embarrassed of the pregnancy. We began telling family and friends near the end of the second trimester, because I was no longer able to visually hide my pregnancy. I can't help wondering why he waited so long to inform me that he did not want to be a father if it was so important to him. Why did he get to decide whether I can tell my family and friends that we are expecting our first baby? As a woman do I have a say in what news we share as a couple? What does this say about intimate relationships? Is the man superior to the woman or is there hope for equal power together as a couple?

Covey (2008) indicated that "four million women are beaten each year by their partners." I can't help but wonder why; if a woman has a different point of view from her partner, does this give him permission to hit her, threaten her, or belittle her? Covey's work in the United States uncovered the reality that male partner violence is the number one health problem for women. I believe this is also true for women in Canada. It is common for pregnancy to precipitate male

partner violence (Gazmarian et al., 1996). According to Statistics Canada (2013) in the 2009 General Social Survey (GSS), 63,300 women, representing about 11% of all spousal victims, reported that in the previous five years they had been victimized by their spouse while they were pregnant (p. 28). Taylor and Nabors (2009) conducted research to examine this unique phenomenon exploring whether pregnancy may heighten the risk of IPV [intimate partner violence] and femicide [intimate partner homicide] for women.

I find comfort from the focus of these studies because I was confused by the violent shift in our relationship that arose during my first pregnancy and continued through the course of our marriage (Fourré, 2006). Amidst all the research, writing and reiterative process of editing I find validation! McMahon and Armstrong (2012) shared how research has shown in relationships with no prior male partner violence “the abuse is initiated during pregnancy” (p. 3) I am not the only woman who discovered her husband was abusive until I became pregnant!

White (2011) corroborated this reality that “women who are pregnant or newly parenting are particularly vulnerable to abuse” (p. 92). ‘We have been married for six years, how do I walk away now?’ I wonder. I wanted so much to celebrate my love with Reginald believing our baby would personify the love we shared. I was heartbroken and disillusioned that Reginald did not feel the same way. When I was threatened and forbidden to reveal my pregnancy to family and friends, I remained in a state of shock for some time. I was so vulnerable; I am pregnant with my first child and will soon be unable to work fulltime, with the financial and emotional responsibility of caring for a baby. White elaborated providing a rationale for the men’s increased violence toward his intimate partner during this vulnerable period:

The danger also extends to the time following birth, when the batterer feels he is losing control over his partner. Her time and attention are no longer totally focused on him but rather on attending to the needs of the infant. (2011, p. 93)

I was overwhelmed by the major transformation my body was experiencing. Reginald's physical and emotional demands were often difficult or impossible to fulfill during this time. While I was pregnant my focus shifted to the future needs of the baby and I did not pay the same amount of time and attention to Reginald. I was confused and bewildered by his increased demands, and the emergence of his emotionally and psychologically violent behaviour. I believed having a baby was something we both wanted and would bring us closer together as a married couple. This is when I began to truly see Reginald's self-absorbed nature which is a common trait in men who choose to abuse their intimate partners (Bancroft, 2002).

* * *

According to Statistics Canada (2013), men are responsible for 83% of the cases involving violence against women. Statistics Canada also noted that in 45% of the cases concerning spousal and dating violence against women, the perpetrator is the woman's intimate partner. In contrast, in violent crimes against men, the perpetrator is rarely (12%) the man's intimate partner (Sinha, 2013, p. 11). In 2013, the country's lowest rates (450 per 100,000 populations) of women who experienced male partner violence were reported in Ontario. The Yukon, had the lowest rate among the territories (1,900 per 100,000 populations) which is just slightly above Saskatchewan's rate (1,250 per 100,000 populations), the highest rate among the provinces (Sinha, p. 21). I was one of those statistics from 1987 to 2001, as Saskatchewan is the setting of my story.

* * *

These statistics resonate with me now as I write my thesis; my waking hours are filled with researching, probing, revisiting, and often re-living the trauma of male partner violence.

Often my slumber involves intense and emotional dreams. One night, my eyes pop open as a distressing occurrence from my past invades my consciousness. I share a story.

I am seven-months pregnant with Buttercup, our youngest child, our third daughter. Throughout our turbulent marriage I speak with counsellors each time I leave. On two occasions I work on myself in the hope of improving my marriage. This story takes place following our second separation shortly after we reunite.

“What you really need to do Sherrie, is stand up for yourself. If you are clear about what you want, your marriage will be happier,” my counsellor, assures me. “In fact there is an assertiveness training course starting next week, and I would like to enrol you in it,” he adds. Determined to be the best wife I could be, I agree to do it. I complete the course and am a model student.

Time passes and shortly after the completion of the course I have a chance to practice my assertiveness skills. Reginald and I are standing in the kitchen arguing.

“Reginald, I understand that you are upset, but I don’t have time to make chocolate cake for supper,” I tell him, asserting myself respectfully.

“You will do what I ask. You are my wife, and it’s your duty. Remember you promised to honour and obey me,” he roars.

Trembling, I persist firmly in my opposing position, “Really, Reginald, it’s not that big of a deal if I make the cake today or tomorrow,” I stammer.

Raising his fists to me, he shouts, “I mean it, Sherrie; I will not tolerate this crap from you.” In this critical moment, I feel a sense of dread creep down my spine as I gaze into his eyes and notice their glazed determination.

Time slows as if being stretched by a leviathan rubber band. My mind travels back to a story Reginald had disclosed to me, earlier in our relationship. "I remember watching Dad hit Mom over and over again until she was a heap in the corner of the kitchen closet. It was terrifying," he confides. "If Mom would have just known when to shut her mouth. . . I mean she just kept on nattering at him until he just couldn't take it anymore. She would often spend days in the bedroom after one of these episodes sulking, she didn't want anyone to see her bruises."

My thoughts spontaneously snap to the present and I find myself staring into his vacant eyes, like a deer frozen in the headlights.

"It's okay Reginald, I will start on the cake shortly," I reassure him. Slowly backing away from his fists, I take a deep breath.

"You damn well better," he snarls as he lowers his hands.

Was this a life and death moment? I will never know what would have taken place; he may have backed down, walked away, delivered only one blow, or perhaps he would have continued hitting me until I was simply a heap on the floor. I honestly believe that my backing down was not an act of weakness but was an act of strength prompted by my love for my baby, for life, and for my family.

My recollection of this episode is vivid; however, I still do not know why Reginald was so angry. I use chocolate cake as an example to illustrate that there were so many occasions and so many rationalizations for Reginald becoming angry with me that they all blur together. The reality is it doesn't matter what he was angry about, what matters is that each and every time my opinion differed from his, abuse ensued.

Why is the woman responsible for keeping peace in the family anyway? Does keeping the peace involve being a doormat? Did my counsellor believe that because I was passive I

somehow allowed my husband to bully me? People say when a woman is bold and assertive, she is a bitch. The contradictive message I receive from my counsellor tells me that when I am passive I am permitting the abuse to continue. It's like a tightrope walk; a little to the right and *poof* I am a bitch, a little to the left and *poof* I am asking for it. Damned if I do, and damned if I don't.

An ideal family

Wuest and Merritt-Grey (1999) addressed how subtle social messages have a powerful impact on women. The societal message that it is the woman's responsibility to establish harmony in the home certainly rings true for me. I did everything in my power to create a peaceful home environment until I came to the realization, this was an impossible task. I truly wanted to be a happy healthy family together. The reason women take a long time to leave an abusive relationship is due in part to constant coercion from their male partners, conflicted emotions, and a lack of societal supports; rather than women's inaction or weakness (Bowker, 1993).

Continuing my search for reasons that kept me in a distressing marriage for so long, I delve further into the literature. Dalton and Schneider (2001) claimed that "the single most consistent barrier to reform against domestic violence has been the Family Ideal—that is, unrelated but nonetheless distinct ideas about family privacy, conjugal and parental rights, and family stability" (p. 13). An ideal family consists of a two-parent household with children; any other assemblage was considered abnormal in this context.

Historically, the central belief of the family ideal was the notion of domestic privacy. Government was to refrain from interference in this private domain. When the English Puritans migrated to the New World, "they believed that neighbors and the church had a duty to regulate

family life” (Dalton & Schneider, 2001, p. 13); however, they did not accept divorce or removal of children from abusive parents unless it was an extraordinary incident. After the central belief was the second element, conjugal and parental rights, deemed that “the head of the household had the power to compel obedience from his wife, children, and servants and maintain domestic harmony” (Dalton & Schneider, 2001, p. 14). The last element of the Family Ideal embraced the idea that the family must be maintained. The primary focus in marriage was to remain married for life, raise children together, and keep the religious sanctity of marriage. Women traditionally would be expected to surrender their personal freedom, and historically, would be obligated to remain married out of a sense of duty and responsibility (Dalton & Schneider, 2001). In modern culture, with the emergence of feminism and “the more generalized quest for self-realization, [women have been encouraged to] question the sacrifices they made automatically in the past” (Dalton & Schneider, 2001, p. 14).

Reading Dalton and Schneider’s (2001) historical account of the Family Ideal twiggled a realization; I completely ascribed to the Family Ideal. I felt a sense of pride living in a traditional family structure. However, the reality of my life with Reginald was a source of shame. I grew up believing that the man was the head of the household, after all that is what I witnessed until as a young girl. I also learned that families stick together and stick up for one another and keep family conflicts in the family. As a child this worked as my nuclear family practiced mutual respect. My three siblings and I understood that dad was the head of the house, but we never feared him. I was “bound to [my] marriage and [my] family by this sense of duty and obligation” (Dalton & Schneider, 2001, p. 14) because I saw this behaviour valued and role modeled by my parents as a young child. So when I saw my children afraid of Reginald as I often was as well, I felt confused.

* * *

When I was only 10 years old I remember saying “When I grow up I want to be a wife and a mother”. I felt confident that this was my destiny. I completely admired my mother and marveled at the genuine love my parents shared not only with each other, but also with my siblings and me. I felt significant and loveable throughout my childhood. I lost these valuable feelings over the course of my seventeen-year marriage.

* * *

Our patriarchal history has contributed to male partner violence. According to Walby (1990), patriarchy is “a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women” (p. 214). The Family Ideal is a patriarchal construct. Dobash and Dobash (1979) concluded that wife battering was socially acceptable because women were subject to their husband’s authority and control placing the women in a subordinate station to their partner. The battered women’s movement identified an atmosphere of patriarchal privilege in our society, rooted in early Greco-Roman laws. This patriarchal advantage held that the husband, as master of the household, had the incontestable right and absolute authority to discipline his wife and children (Deaton and Hertica, 2001). Women time and again become entangled in this marital hierarchy, Dobash and Dobash (1979) explain:

Patriarchal domination through force, [make it], difficult for a woman to struggle against this, and other forms of domination and control, because her struggle is construed as wrong, immoral, and a violation of the respect and loyalty a wife is supposed to have for her husband. (p. ix)

I think my husband actually believed this to be true, and honestly, I think I bought into this belief system as well.

The cornerstone of patriarchy included laws that “historically sanctioned the abuse of women within marriage as an aspect of a husband’s ownership of his wife and his right to chastise her” (Status of Women Canada, 2002, p. 2). Until a revision in 1842, U.S. law was abided by the “rule of thumb”; which permitted a man to beat his wife with a switch providing the switch was no wider than his thumb (Deaton & Hertica, 2001, p. 1). Although no longer in this context, the term, rule of thumb is still commonly used in our society. The history of politics, religion, and socioeconomics is directly related to the domination of men over women. The idea that this patriarchal family structure is normal, sanctified, and honourable lends to it being passed on through the generations (Dobash & Dobash, 1979).

Tying in religion

Men and women in intimate relationships historically have become accepting of the patriarchal structure of the family because it is supported by economic, political, and religious institutions. Duffy and Momirov (1997) claimed that patriarchy is evident in the church demonstrated by an unspoken, “moral obligation of men, as commanded by the church to ensure that their wives and children behave themselves properly” (p. 123). Over time this belief has become a social construct. The idea of religious beliefs as a primary factor for staying in an abusive relationship is a relevant one to consider, indeed, it was the central theme in my story.

Being married in the Catholic Church was a source of pride for me as I grew up in a Roman Catholic household. Sundays were a day of rest so my dad, who usually worked long hours, was free to spend the day with us. The morning began with church followed by a big family meal which we enjoyed together. Sunday was the day we would visit my grandparents on the farm or have friends and relatives over to socialize. I still cherish these childhood memories

associated with church, family, food, and socialization. When my father suddenly died my life changed dramatically.

I believe the Holy Spirit works in mysterious ways, in my family, the Holy Spirit materialized in Father Knight. The early months after the tragic loss of my dad, Father Knight stopped by for appreciated regular visits. He would show us magic tricks, help us with our homework, or just sit with us and talk. Father Knight provided my family with companionship and comfort at a time when our world was crumbling. As a teenager I continued to attend church regularly, as it was something I could count on. The sacrament of the Holy Eucharist and confession provided me with God's grace at a time in my life when I needed it the most. I felt close to God, my dad, and father Knight in church on Sundays. Church was a place where I found peace. My faith and church continue to be a source of strength for me today. I reflect on my thoughts while I restructured my life.

My journal entry *Monday, January 17, 2000, 1:04 a.m.*

I read something really cool tonight that said, "God only gives us what we can handle." He really must think the world of me! This is something to hold on to.

My life after leaving Reginald was full of unexpected court costs, housing challenges, and figuring out what I was going to do with my life from this point forward. It is exhausting work and the idea that I was capable with God's help to handle all of this was encouraging at this moment in time. I have since come to understand how God is there to provide grace and strength to endure difficult times. When I entered into my union with Reginald I believed it would be the same as my parents. Marriage is a lifelong commitment; it is a sacrament, an unbreakable bond with God. On October 17, 1981, I recall reciting this promise to Reginald:

“I take you, Reginald, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love, cherish, and obey till death us do part, according to God's holy law, and this is my solemn vow.”

“I can't believe you said you would obey him, Sherrie,” my two younger sisters chimed.

“It's part of the marriage vows; I didn't have a choice,” I answer.

To be honest I didn't think it was a big deal to promise to obey Reginald because I loved him and I believed that as his wife, it was my duty to follow his lead. I didn't realize that this would mean denying my own desires and morals. When it came to my children; however, it became increasingly difficult to follow Reginald's governance.

* * *

The idea of supremacy or omnipotence is a pertinent factor in male partner abuse. For most of my marriage, I considered Reginald to be my superior simply because he was my husband. Generally I followed his instructions dutifully because I wanted to be a 'good wife,' and when I balked at his desires I would be ridiculed until I resumed my role of the 'obedient wife.' It was important to me to be faithful to Reginald as we were married in the church and joined together by the sacrament of Holy Matrimony. Leaving Reginald meant breaking the bond of this Holy sacrament.

Religion and culture are important dynamics for me to deliberate. Lundgren (1998) studied abuse in a pilot study of religion-based abuse that included in-depth interviews with a sample of women with whom she maintained contact over a long period of time. Lundgren focused on understanding the legitimization activities around violent behaviour and creating an understanding of abuse as a process. This process involved viewing violence as 'normal' and 'acceptable' behaviour within the intimate partner relationship for both men and women. This

study focused on the religion-based abuse, but it also considered the cultural dynamic within this environment. A critical piece of this ‘normalization’ process is the ‘internalization’ of the violence. For the woman this occurs as a result of the physical and psychological seclusion. For the man this ‘internalization’ occurs through his use of power and intermittent use of violence and benevolence which Lundgren referred to as “the torture effect” resulting in the creation of an ‘externalization of violence. Lundgren proposed how at this point the man “gradually ceased to behave simply as an individual and instead became his ideal type of ‘Man/Husband’ or ‘God’ (the one who controls life and death)” (1998, p. 171). As I conduct my research, this portrayal of abuse presently makes sense to me though I was unsuspecting of this progression during the time it unfolded in my life. I resisted leaving Reginald even though living with him had become increasingly unbearable, because it involved letting go of my dream to spend a lifetime with one man, the father of my children.

* * *

“I want to know how to fix my marriage,” I enquire to the new female counsellor assigned to me through Mental Health. This is my first visit, I am married and Dianthus is about one-year old at this time.

“You are in an abusive marriage,” she states rather bluntly.

“You don’t understand. I love my husband. I just want our marriage to be better,” I implore her in an attempt to convince her that she can help me.

“Your marriage is abusive,” she restates rather coldly. Once again she restates. “You are in an abusive marriage. You have to leave. It’s your only option,” she announces.

I feel nauseous. I can't breathe. It's like the wind has been knocked out of me. I stop talking as I stare blankly into her eyes. Sitting frozen in my chair, I attempt to digest her absurd instructions. I decide she is wrong . . . I do not see this counsellor again.

As I leave I pray "Please dear Lord, help Reginald be happier. I love him and I want our marriage to be forever. It's so hard when he yells and swears at me. Help me to be patient and loving," I pray and weep.

* * *

I did finally come to accept that I was in an abusive marriage and the most logical course of action was to leave and break my bond of marriage. I write in a letter addressed to Reginald dated March 9, 2006.

I was convinced that I needed to stay with you because we entered into the sacrament of marriage. I needed to stay with you and to love you no matter what happened. Unfortunately, no matter what . . . resulted in my dying a little every day. I stopped feeling anything. I became numb. One day I stopped loving myself and you . . .

I face judgment from Reginald's family as a result of this revelation. As my father died tragically when I was only 12 years-old, I so desperately wanted Reginald's dad to fill this position but our relationship was never what I had hoped it would be.

"You need to forgive Reginald if you expect to go to heaven," my father-in-law informs me.

And then on the flip side . . . After I left, Reginald's father sent cards and notes filled with kind words which meant the world to me. On Thursday January 28, 1999 I receive a birthday card with \$50.00 cash and a short note from John, Reginald's father and Kalina, Reginald's step-mother.

Dear Sherrie

Just a line to wish you a Happy Birthday. We still Love you and I'm very sorry that life had to turn out this way for you. I pray that God will look after you and my three grand-daughters.

Reading this note touched my heart. I was an integral member of this family for close to 20 years and now I miss so many aspects of the life and people I left behind. I think about this when I am asked, "Why did you stay for so long?" I could answer "They are my family and I love them all very much." I only wish it was enough.

* * *

I am damned if I do leave and break apart our family, and I am damned if I don't leave and continue to expose myself and my children to abuse.

* * *

I recall an uncomfortable and unpleasant telephone conversation with Reginald 7 months after leaving and moving to Saskatoon

I phoned Reginald tonight.

"Why can't I see the girls all weekend unsupervised?" he queries.

"Verbal abuse, mental abuse, and physical abuse," I fire back, feeling pleased with myself.

"I suppose that's why you left too," he surmises.

"Yes," I reply. I'm irritated as I wonder how many times I have to tell him before he gets it.

"How can a divorced person go to church?" he asks in a familiar sarcastic tone suggesting that I have no right to still attend church.

"Do you go to church?" I gently ask.

"Yes," he quickly replies.

"Well?" I ask a bit sarcastically.

“I didn’t want this; it was all your doing. You are going to have to face God. How can you face God with all you have been doing? Keeping the girls from their father? I loved them. I treated them well. You don’t want them to have a father. You will have to face God. I hope you are prepared to do that.”

As I listen to Reginald question my faith and spiritual beliefs, I feel weary. It’s as if every time I listen to him, he uses my soul as a punching bag. My faith is a huge piece of how I see myself, a good, loving, and gentle, woman, mother, wife, and daughter-in law.

* * *

Letter dated March 9, 2006

Dear Reginald,

Over the years I have forgiven you for how you took your anger out on us. I realize you grew up in a home where you saw this behaviour and you simply didn’t know how to express yourself in a positive way.

I pray for you all the time and I want you to be happy. I was in church the other day and Father Leo spoke about forgiveness. I thought I had already forgiven you when I realized I had not yet forgiven you for not loving me. Maybe you didn’t feel loved or you don’t love yourself. I am not sure but I do need to forgive you for not loving me. Love means acceptance, encouragement, and warmth and I have all this now. Because I removed us to a home where we are all free to love and be loved. For so long I haven’t been able to forgive myself for not leaving sooner. It has been 7 years and 4 1/2 months since we left and we are just fine. We are more than fine, we are loved and we are capable of love.

I finally gave up hope that Reginald would change. My purpose for leaving on the first two occasions was to send him a strong, clear message that we needed to have harmony in our home. Each time I left it was with the intention of returning. Sev’er (2002) referred to a revolving door as a distinct feature in male partner violence. She described how leaving and returning “is a problem that reflects the tendency of women to return to their abusers without

being able to secure either a behavioural or an attitudinal change in their partners” (p. 37). I miss the man I wish he was, loving, respectful, and happy.

Traditionally men benefited from a superior status while women endured an inferior position in society. This dominant opinion was strictly upheld until the emergence of feminism.

Feminism

Throughout history writing and research were conducted by men and therefore represented an entirely male point of view of the world. This practice inadvertently contributed to the oppression of women. With the omission of a woman’s voice and perspective the world was seen entirely through the eyes of men. Although individual men have differing perspectives, the exclusion of women’s understandings established the male perspective adequately represented all of society. In the 1880’s, the term feminism was coined, according to Freedman (2002) the “term combined the French word for woman, *femme*, and *-isme*, which referred to a social movement or political ideology” (p. 3). Feminism holds that a woman’s voice, point of view, and sense of self are equally important to a man’s voice and point of view (Gilligan, 1993). Feminism allowed for male and female voices to be expressed with equal weight in research and literature. With feminism came the inclusion of women’s autobiographical compositions.

Smith and Watson (1998) celebrated the evolution of women’s autobiographical writing and declared that, “women’s autobiography is now a privileged site for thinking about issues of writing at the intersection of feminist, postcolonial, and postmodern critical theories” (p. 5). I consider autobiography to be a pivotal piece of autoethnographical work. Before the women’s movement, autobiographical work was predominately presented from a male perspective. This is important to note because in male partner violence women are often silenced, resulting in a loss of their figurative voice. Feminism has transformed the traditional idea of what it means to be a

woman, “growing up female, coming to voice, affiliation, sexuality and textuality, the life cycle” (Smith & Watson, 1998, p. 5).

Women’s autobiographical writing has provided an avenue to authentically reexamine social perceptions of male partner violence. Freedman (2002) cautioned that, “assuming all women experience the world alike can blur the power of the feminist vision” (p. 9). She shares a story where people are invited to look at the world through women’s eyes and was met with a profound counter question from one woman, “Which women’s eyes? . . . [Thus Freedman] reminds us that we cannot universalize the female, given our national and cultural differences” (2002, p. 9). Therefore my Ukrainian, Polish, and Russian heritage; Catholic upbringing and education; and rural ties are part of my identity and viewpoint. I acknowledge that my stories are told from my perspective as a white middle class woman born and raised in a small urban center of Saskatchewan, Canada.

The Juxtaposition of Feminism and Autoethnography

Autoethnography and feminism epistemology are woven together by their very nature. Both allow personal insight and awareness to be part of a genuine and candid study. In this way autoethnography and feminism are instrumental to portray the trauma of male partner violence. Sev’er (1997) noted how “Feminist theories in general converge on seeking the roots of violence in the interlocking of social structures with the interpersonal processes by emphasizing the central role of the gendered distribution of power” (p. 571).

Conveying my “truth or truths, through an autoethnographic lens, allows [me] to address the tensions between truths, whether personal or epistemological, in a political and hopeful act” (Giorgio, 2009, pp.165-166). In this way autoethnographic research brings a new awareness into political and societal issues such as domination, coercion and other societal traumas (i.e., male

partner violence). The truths revealed in autoethnography offer a fresh approach to deal with these issues in a way that could elicit change (Giorgio, 2009).

Richardson (1990) explained how stories told in an autobiographical format enable the writer's to reconcile the past and see how it connects to the present. Richardson acknowledged that "people organize their personal biographies and understand them through the stories they create to explain and justify their life experiences," (1990, p. 23) while recognizing how occasions generally consist of a beginning, a middle, and end. Writing about pertinent life events for this paper has proven to be both thought-provoking and perplexing. I am provided an opportunity to reexamine past decisions from a different perspective. I presently have additional resources and knowledge at my disposal. Therefore I struggle internally with the conundrum, if I would have known then what I know now, would I make the same decisions?

A Feminist Way of Viewing Male Partner Violence

What is the feminist point of view on male partner violence? Michelle Bograd and Kersti Yllö (1988) investigated this central query in their edited book entitled *Feminist Perspectives on Wife Abuse*. Bograd (1988) announced "Given the wide variety of feminist philosophers, there is no unified perspective on wife abuse" (p. 13). In view of this, while I employ a feminist way of viewing male partner violence, I do not focus on one particular stance. I refer to Hein's (1993) explanation for viewing the nuances of feminist theory:

Typically feminist theory has to do with gender. In the eyes of most of the world that is what feminism is all about. . . . Thus theorizing gender brings us face to face with the ineluctable paradox of difference; and where there is difference there is possibility that things may be other than they are. (pp. 6-7)

Bograd (1988) summarized four main features common to all feminist positions on this disturbing societal issue:

The explanatory utility of the constructs of gender and power; the analysis of the family as a historically situated social institution; the crucial importance of understanding and validating women's experiences; [and] employing scholarship *for* women. (pp. 13-14)

In regard to scholarship for women I see an important aspect of viewing male partner violence through a feminist lens is to begin to "develop theories and models that more accurately reflect women's experiences" (Bograd, 1988, p. 16). Women reading other women's autobiographical writings have experienced them as "mirrors of their own unvoiced aspirations" (p. 5) which Smith and Watson (1998) stressed when describing the importance of women's perspective. I use a feminist theoretical lens to view male partner violence.

Sev'er (2007), a sociologist and feminist, acknowledged and credited feminist research and theory as having a significant role in "creating greater awareness of the hierarchical power within most families" (p. 236). This hierarchical influence is also present in society. Sev'er (2002) stressed the significance of viewing male partner violence through a feminist lens because "Feminists ask if abuse can be captured adequately by piecemeal counts of slaps or kicks without due recognition of the imbalances in power, strength, privilege, intent, motive, damage, and terror that precede, accompany, or follow those acts?" (p. 21). Possessing superior physical power and using that power to control, coerce or harm is an intrinsic aspect of male partner violence. I contemplate the implications of male advantage as I recall, on so many occasions, I lay pinned on the floor squirming and struggling to get Reginald off of me, I would eventually lay still and sob, knowing that I was no match to his physical strength. Reginald was physically stronger than I; however, it was his choice to utilize his power over me in an affronting manner.

I consider my personal testimony fits with the feminist belief as Bograd (1988) stated, "a basic step toward understanding the factors contributing to wife abuse is illuminating the experiences of women from their own frames of reference" (p. 15). Bograd highlighted how

even when particular men do not engage in coercive behaviour against their companions, “men as a class benefit from how women’s lives are restricted and limited because of their fear of violence by husbands and lovers as well as by strangers” (p. 14). Thus I see the importance of examining my experiences in a social context. Michele Bograd (1988) emphasized:

As feminists link wife abuse to the structure of current family life, they draw theoretical and empirical links between the personal and the political, which leads to new understandings of battering: Wife abuse is not a private matter but a social one. (p. 15)

This autoethnographical thesis is my attempt to portray one woman’s experience of living with, and leaving male partner violence within a sociohistorical context then reliving it by conducting research about my lived experiences of this process. In this way male partner violence must also be viewed in the current sociohistorical context and status quo. My subjective experience has value in research because it has the ability to expand our knowledge. There is a possibility to make a positive social change that moves beyond this research because it opens up the discussion about the messiness of male partner violence.

Beginning to comprehend the societal implications of male partner violence is best understood viewing it through a feminist lens, examining society’s patriarchal history and the patriarchal organization in religion (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Harway & O’Neil, 1999; and Yllö & Bograd, 2001). Johnson and Leone (2005) informed that “Feminist theory conceptualizes male partner violence as a matter of control, rooted in patriarchal traditions of male dominance in heterosexual relationships, especially marriage” (p. 323), (Dobash & Dobash, 1979; Yllö & Bograd, 1988). Unfortunately, women who have experienced male partner violence display symptoms generally explained in a manner that further victimizes them, rather than unraveling the complexities involved in male partner violence.

Feminism acknowledges that not all women see the world in one particular way; this is particularly true for women who experience male partner violence. I offer you personal insight into my lived experience of living with and leaving male partner violence. My hope is that my stories will resonate with you in a way that breaks down cultural stereotypes of women who have experienced male partner violence. Some of my personal experiences of living with and leaving male partner violence are recorded in my journal, a safe place to document my thoughts, emotions, fears, and desires. The subsequent excerpt from my journal provides a glimpse into some of the challenges I face after leaving Reginald.

* * *

My journal dated, *Tuesday, August 24, 1999, 11 p.m.*

I am sitting outside at the picnic table [at Adelle House]. This seems to be a calming place for me. It is beautiful outside, dark but also with lots of lights; quiet but with lots of noise from the bars, cars, and power lines. Somehow I can truly feel when I am outside.

I have been quite down since Thursday, when Rainbow Housing in Saskatoon rejected my application because I don't have any subsidy available at this time; they also raised concerns that my ex-husband could damage property, as this has happened in the past with other women who had left a violent partner. I guess I put a lot of faith into getting accepted. I need to get over it and get on with things. It's just scary because I am only allowed to live here until the end of November; one year is the limit.

I have been feeling a little lost lately, realizing that Reginald was a part of my identity. He was a part of who I was. I drove past a freshly swathed field ready to be combined and discovered that I really missed the whole commotion of the fall, the smells the food, even the dust. Farm life was a part of my identity. Now what? What do I do? Where do I go? What do I want? What do I feel? I feel completely and utterly overwhelmed and exhausted, so exhausted.

I also feel so alone with no one to share with . . . no one to understand . . . no one to tell me everything is going to be okay. I am so sad. Now how do I pick myself up and dust myself off and start all over again? I'm so scared of screwing it all up.

I also feel frustrated that no one seems to realize how difficult a task this all is, how much energy it takes. Reginald was a part of my identity. This so very difficult, even though I know it is truly the right path for my life. I guess where I get lost is I don't know where this path will lead.

It feels good to write. I have had a headache for the past few days and writing seems to help sort things out . . . identify what I am feeling . . . where my thoughts are going. Why do I feel so alone? Is it because I need to be alone right now?

* * *

Feminists do not examine why a particular man beats his wife, but rather focuses on a way to better understand “why men in general use physical force against their partners and what function this serves for a given society in a specific historical context” (Bograd, 1988, p. 13). The feminist approach differs from other approaches by the way questions are asked. Feminists ask the primary question: “Why do men beat their wives? [Opposed to questions such as:] . . . What psychopathology leads to violence? . . . Why are people involved in violent interactions in families? . . . How is violence in the family related to our violent society” (Bograd, 1988, p. 13)?

Kersti Yllö (1984), a prominent feminist, and one of early feminist researchers in the area of marital equality and violence against wives spoke to the research being conducted during this era, “Feminist explanations of violence against wives have been an important exception to the general inattention to the social structure” (p. 308). Dobash and Dobash (1979) viewed patriarchal society as a primary factor in male partner violence. As long as the sexist sociocultural environment is dismissed as a significant influence, women will continue to be held responsible for their own victimization (Yllö, 1984).

Yllö (1989) wrote an article entitled “Family secrets: Teaching about violence against women”. She shared how she believes a sociocultural feminist account is most helpful to attempt to unravel this violence. Sociological work takes into account how cultural norms affect the social structure but offers little focus on gender (Yllö and Bograd, 1988). “Feminists take gender

as the central category of analysis and then explore the variations in women's experience with violence as they are shaped by race, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age and so on" (Yllö, 1989, p. 20). It is important to include all women's experience of race and power not just the white women's way of experiencing gender, power, and oppression (hooks, 2004).

Goldner, Penn, Sheinberg, and Walker (1990), feminist therapists developed the *feminist relational view of battering* as a multilevel exploration which merges social learning, sociopolitical, and systemic levels of analysis of male partner violence. Momirov and Duffy (2011) noted that this integrated research could prove beneficial at the "individual, interpersonal, and societal levels" (2011, p. 175). Although Goldner et al.'s (1990) work is not yet fully developed, Yllö, observed how "these researchers are trying to explore the full subjective experience of batterers and the women they abuse without losing sight of the male dominance in relationships and in society" (1993, p. 57). Studying male partner violence using autoethnographical research inherently includes sociocultural and sociopolitical interpretation.

Yllö (1993) offered a cautionary message regarding future research on male partner violence:

If our mutual goal is to understand the violence in order to stop it, then we must welcome the changes other viewpoints pose and give them respectful consideration. My point that feminism is a necessary, but not sufficient, lens for understanding violence is a challenge to all of us to deepen our views. (pp. 59-60)

Graham, Rawlings, and Rimini (1988) determined that male violence was responsible for wife abuse, not women's behaviour, and "the defect that leads to wife abuse exists not in women but in patriarchal society" (p. 232). Historically male-dominated social structures contribute to male privilege and violence, and women's subordination to men. (Gill, 2006) Domination, oppression,

and absence of voice unfailingly occur in the patriarchal structure of traditional social institutions.

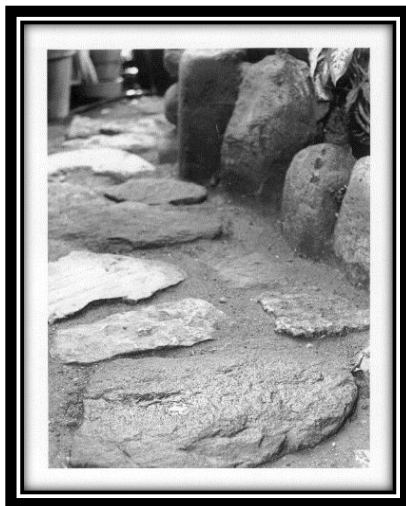
Stark (2007) posited that because “personal life, economic life, and political life are interwoven in so many ways in modern, industrialized societies . . . it seems eminently reasonable to treat them as part of a single dynamic rather than as separate spheres” (p. 386). In Gill’s (2006) research she included four macro/societal-level theoretical approaches (lifestyle/routine, resource, social control, and feminist), and then separated them to the micro/individual level (psychopathological, social learning, sex roles, and situational) to better understand the phenomena of male partner violence and determine the most appropriate intervention strategies. The micro/individual level excludes social and cultural factors and focuses on a person’s specific and psychological characteristics.

I focus on the micro/individual level using autoethnography, I tell my story and in a feminist theoretical framework because there is power in one voice. The personal is political, telling one story has the potential of affecting social change because when I tell my story it opens up the conversation about this sensitive societal issue. I seek interconnections through the analysis of my own life which moves beyond this research which has changed how I see the world and how I see myself in it. I am convinced by challenging the cultural assumptions are a way of influencing the sociocultural and sociopolitical systems.

An article describing a study by Nettleton (2011) addresses and confronts the absurdity and danger of societal norms regarding male partner violence as seen in popular magazines. Nettleton noted how “magazines provide potent instruction in social interaction” (p. 145). In her study Nettleton found men’s magazines represent a flippant attitude often dismissing the seriousness of domestic violence statistics and accuse women of amplifying the issue. In contrast

women's magazines focus on how women are both responsible for the violence they experience and for its prevention. (Nettleton, 2011) We continue to be bombarded with these influential societal messages in magazines, movies, television shows, and other forms of mass media. It is essential that we confront these destructive and dehumanizing sociocultural expectations of gender, I recognize this will be a difficult endeavour. I admit that my research reveals only a sliver of insight into this sensitive phenomenon. Medford (2006) shared how autoethnography carries a burden, "I continue to contemplate the consequences, both immediate and long term, that may come from making my questions and my position known" (p. 863).

* * *



This picture is a piece of a composition of black and white photographs I shot and developed during a university photography class. This hard winding stone path represents the steps I took to move past male partner violence.

Figure 5: Stone path. 2005.

Black and white photograph. 8 x 10 (20.32 x 25.4). Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.

* * *

The Force of Psychological Violence

Beverly Engel (2002) described emotional abuse akin to "brainwashing in that it systematically wears away at the victim's self-confidence [and] sense of self-worth" (p. 12). Engel defined emotional abuse as "any nonphysical behavior or *attitude* that is designed to control, intimidate, subjugate, demean, punish, or isolate another person" (2002, p. 12).

Emotional abuse is insidious. Its effects linger and cut to the “core of a person” (Engel, 2002, p. 13). This form of violence adversely affects one’s self-esteem; these emotional wounds take an indeterminable amount of time to heal. I recall the pain and anguish of being reprimanded and demeaned on a daily basis. It took years for me to trust my own perceptions and self-efficacy.

A form of emotional abuse that causes someone to doubt themselves and their reality is referred to as gaslighting. The term gaslighting is taken from the 1944 movie, *Gaslight* where a woman begins to believe she was losing her mind due to mind games and manipulation by her husband. In this form of violence the abuser is knowingly aware of their premeditated actions. The intent of gaslighting is to discredit or alienate their partner in a way that absolves them of any wrongdoing while making the partner feel crazy and question her reality (Engel, 2002). This is commonly dubbed crazy-making. I often doubted my version of reality as I endured periods of crazy-making during my 17-year marriage.

* * *

“Get in your room. It’s bedtime,” Reginald shouts at Rose (5-years-old).

Although Rose flinches she does not go to her bedroom, but rather plants herself firmly on the floor.

“I said get in your room, now,” he screams as he grabs her by the ear, picking her up to her feet, and then drags her to her room.

Rose plops on her bed and begins wailing.

“You better shut up and go to sleep or I’ll give you something to cry about,” he screeches.

Feeling uneasy and fearful I rush into the bedroom to console her. It is about 9 p.m. I lie beside her on the bottom double-sized bunk bed and begin to sing to her very softly.

She continues to cry as I hold her, stroking her hair and singing to her.

“I can’t sleep, shut that kid up or I will come in there and shut her up,” Reginald bellows from our bedroom.

I lean in really close to Rose and plead with her, “Please Rose, just try to stop crying.” Rose holds her breathe in an attempt to stop. Then after a short minute she heaves out a big sigh.

“I can’t Mommy, I just can’t stop crying. I tried, really I did Mommy.”

“It’s okay baby, if you need to cry you can cry. I will stay with you.” I give her Tylenol, hold her, and sing to her for over two hours, and she continues to weep the entire time.

“That’s it, I can’t take it anymore. Get out, get out of this house. I can’t sleep with all this noise.” Reginald is now standing at the bedroom door.

I lean in closer to shield Rose with my body. “She is sick, her ear hurts, and she can’t stop crying. Can’t you see she is in pain?” I gently but firmly explain.

“I don’t care. Get out of this house right now. I am not putting up with this shit anymore,” Reginald screams as he walks back to our bedroom.

I pick Rose up, wrapping her in blankets, and I collect Dianthus from the top bunk. She is awake from all the yelling. I think about where we will go and whether I should phone first or just show up at midnight at Dot’s house (Dot is Rose’s godmother, my good friend and neighbour). We get into the car, and just as I strap the girls in their car seats Reginald appears, standing in front of the car.

“What the hell are you doing? Where do you think you’re going?” he demands.

“You told us to leave,” I respond, feeling confused.

“You’re not going anywhere. Get back in the house,” he commands.

“I can’t get her settled; she is in pain. You told us to leave, and I am leaving,” I say as I attempt to get in the car.

“You are not going anywhere! Get back in the house. What’s wrong with you?” he yells as he physically blocks me.

Feeling exhausted, dazed, and physically overpowered I bring the children back into the house. Rose weeps on and off the entire night. I do not sleep and stay with her all night. In the morning I pack her up in the car and take her in to see the doctor to discover that she has an ear infection.

* * *

Why didn’t I leave after this bizarre episode? I recall thinking asking myself: ‘Did I make too big of a deal about this? Maybe he was just tired and I over reacted, maybe Rose’s was crying louder than I thought, I was just so exhausted and Reginald felt bad, this was just a huge misunderstanding, right? So was he trying to make me feel crazy or is that just how I felt?’ First Reginald ordered me out of the house and then he ordered me back into the house. I felt dizzy, confused and powerless to comply with his conflicting orders. I was afraid of Reginald which he often found amusing, calling me paranoid. I questioned my thoughts and reactions to Reginald as I was aware that many women had suffered much more violence in their intimate relationships. Goodman and Epstein (2008) explained that “unlike the experience of being assaulted by a stranger in combat, domestic violence victims experience repeated abuse, committed by someone they know and care about, over a long period of time” (p. 56). I was experiencing this unimaginable betrayal by my intimate partner, the man I believed would protect and cherish me.

R. E. Dobash and R. P. Dobash (1979) discussed the many issues an abused woman must consider when she is deciding to leave her marriage. Although these authors proposed this over

thirty years ago, these issues remain valid today. The idea of “giving up the status of a wife and taking on the still somewhat stigmatized status of a divorcee and learning to live alone and independently” (p. 147) scared me and left me feeling paralyzed. The status of wife was a source of pride for me; our society encourages women to be wives and mothers to be women (Morgan, 2000). I was reluctant to surrender this preferred status. As a “woman who has been dominated, controlled, and frightened for years, [I] had lost a great deal of self-confidence and self-esteem” (Dobash & Dobash, 1979, p. 147) the prospect of living alone was indeed terrifying and this fear served as another obstacle to leaving. Leaving and staying away from my abusive marriage was one of the hardest things I have done in my life.

* * *

I recorded this time in my life. I had been in Saskatoon for 4 months and I was living at Adelle House.

My journal dated *Monday, February 8, 1999, 12:40 a.m.*

I find myself thinking about Reginald. He has been part of my life for 19 years, and now I no longer want to even see him. It's like a death but more difficult because I am going to talk to him and see him again.

My car broke down again today. I phoned Mannie [Reginald's brother] and after doing some running around after a jerry can, I had to phone a tow truck. I am getting so tired of always having to lean on everyone to help me get around to get the girls to hockey etc. etc.

* * *

Skolnik (2012) addressed the reality that there are “historical patterns in which dominant groups have pathologized the ‘other’ for the purpose of social control” (p. 127). It seems that Reginald believed he had to control me by whatever means necessary.

He would often, “Is there anything in between your ears, or is it all full of mush?”

I also recall hearing, “You are depressed, and really something is wrong in your head. I tell you these things because I care about you,” he assures me.

*“You are nothing but a **dumb cunt** or a **stupid bitch!**” Reginald explains, “Maybe I could use different words but really, I just want you to make better choices.”*

“Consider yourself lucky I want you because no one else would, I don’t think you realize how blessed you are to have a husband who loves you so much. You should appreciate me more,” Reginald advises.

Viktor Frankl (1992), a concentration camp survivor, shared how when a person is put in an abnormal situation, it is normal for that person to respond in abnormal ways. I refer to this period of my life as a twilight zone existence; it was surreal even when I recall it now. Sonkin, Del Martin, and Walker (1985) formulated that men would use bullying tactic to get their needs met because they “lack the skills and self-confidence to ask affirmatively for what they want in a nonthreatening manner” (p. 44). When I would hear Reginald utter, “When I call you a fat cow it’s because I love you. I am just being honest with you. I know you care about how you look and if I don’t tell you how fat you are getting how will you know?” My mind would be a jumble of thoughts and emotions after hearing this kind of logic. I would feel hurt and confused; I didn’t like being called a fat cow. Then I would reason that his words may have been cruel, but he cared about me in his own way. He wants me to look after myself, I decide, ‘but why does he have to call me a fat cow?’ I think to myself. Today I recognize this behaviour for what it really is emotional and psychological violence.

Sonkin et al. (1985) discovered that men who use violence will often “minimize and deny their violent behavior . . . often [viewing] the woman as the cause of their violence” (p. 42). I would hear Reginald explain, “I am sorry I didn’t want to get so tough with you, but how else are

you going to learn. If you did it right in the first place, I wouldn't have to yell at you."

Alternately, Sonkin et al. found that these men "are usually very dependent on their partners as the source of love, support, intimacy, and problem solving" (1985, p. 43). Reginald would openly discuss his desire to date other women with me. "You are my best friend, I can tell you anything" he would say. Or he would offer, "I am trying to make you jealous. I want you to fight for me." Feeling confused I think to myself, 'you chose to marry me, why do I have to fight for you now?'

Sonkin et al. (1985) noted that "men who batter come from all socioeconomic backgrounds, races, religions, and walks of life" (p. 41). Recognizing a generational component Sonkin et al. highlighted how "many men who batter have had childhood experiences that have led to the development of poor self-image, such as child abuse or witnessing spouse abuse" (1985, p. 44). I think about how Reginald's childhood may have contributed to his behaviour and way of thinking.

Reginald was 24 years-old when we met, and I was 17. He shared with me that he did not date much before we met because he felt uncomfortable around women. I recall Reginald's description of witnessing his mother being beaten, humiliated, and disrespected on a regular basis by his father. I think about Reginald's three younger brothers who all witnessed this violence growing up. I wonder about the residual effects of trauma in their lives. I share an excerpt from a letter I wrote to Reginald.

I remember you talking about your mom who I thought to be an amazing and beautiful woman. You spoke of her so disrespectfully. She was loveable person in my mind.

Mina, Reginald's mom stayed in the abusive marriage until her death at age 52. Although I only spent a short time with Mina before she developed cancer, I truly loved and respected this gentle woman. My heart aches thinking about the anguish she endured throughout her violent

marriage. I am currently 52 years-old. It twigged with me that I am the same age she was when she died which physically and emotionally shook me. There are so many reasons she stayed in a violent and unhappy marriage for so long. Unlike Mina I had so many other options and yet I also chose to stay for way too long. I wasn't willing to just walk away from my commitment and my dream. I guess I wanted to be able to look at myself in the mirror and know deep down in my soul that I had given my marriage my best effort.

When a woman is instructed to 'just leave' it doesn't take into account all the intertwined aspects of her life. I genuinely believed if I just loved Reginald enough and prayed hard enough our life together would be wonderful. Wuest and Merritt-Grey reported that in interviews women commonly believed that if they had "been more 'obedient' or 'self-sacrificing' or 'caring' they could have made the relationship work" (1999, p. 84). I wanted the fairy tale, the happily ever where we would grow old together and forever cherish each other. Is it ridiculous to want to live up to my commitment to *love in sickness and in health, in good times and in bad until death us do part*? How good is my word if I walk away? What am I worth if I walk away? If I walk away, I not only walk away from Reginald, I walk away from a way of life, my life.

The most commonly asked question is why do women stay? I respect the thought and research involved in attempting to understand male partner violence; however, I find many theories tend to patronize the woman's experience of violence. I noticed that many of these theories pathologize a woman's experience of male partner violence. Skolnik (2012) declared how "The practice of branding oppressed people, as well as their resistance to subjugation, as disordered thinking is nothing new in the fields of psychology and psychiatry" (p. 126). Starting life over was exhausting, is exhausting. I often felt overwhelmed; there are so many unknowns to deal with while being responsible for three children. My life has definitely been affected by

trauma as I suffered emotional abuse for over two decades. So what kept me in an unhealthy and abusive marriage for so long?

Various theories that are commonly used to explain why women stay in abusive relationships, some examples are: traumatic bonding, learned helplessness, the cycle of violence. I include personal stories of my lived experience with Reginald. Theories are different points of view rather than either/or positions to be defended. Each point of view contains valuable insights. Theories are backed by research but often not personal experience. I am offering a personal point of view with my story from the vantage point of lived experience. I consider Richardson (2001) as she expressed how, “crystals are prisms, which reflect externalities and refract within themselves, creating different colours, patterns, arrays, casting off in different directions. What we see depends on our angle of repose” (p. 517). My angle of vision is as a woman who has lived with and left male partner violence and now is also a researcher attempting to unravel this convoluted mystery impacting women worldwide. As human beings we tend to think in terms of extreme opposites. Often our beliefs are formulated in terms of Either-Ors, rather than on any intermediary possibilities. Compromise is induced only when practically neither of the extremes can be acted upon (Dewey, 1939). I negotiate an alternate way of researching male partner violence.

A single theory is like Maslow’s (1966) law of the hammer. Maslow formulated how “if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail” (pp. 15-16). I understand this to mean that when we look at everything through the same lens our view generally remains the same. Using autoethnography as a way of examining male partner violence is a different way of understanding an established societal phenomenon. I appreciate Maslow’s depiction of the hammer, because I often say we need to have different approaches or tools to

deal with various problems. One theory called *traumatic bonding* offers an attempt to answer the query, why women stay in abusive relationships for so long?

Traumatic bonding

Dutton and Painter's (1993) traumatic bonding theory developed in 1981 holds that women stay in abusive relationships, because they become emotionally attached to their abuser. Traumatic bonding is a theory applied to male partner violence to explain the incredibly powerful attachment of the woman to the abusive man and in turn of the abusive man to the woman. Dutton and Painter's research on traumatic bonding made sense to me, because when they discussed the significance of omnipotence, where the abuser must maintain absolute control, I lived it. Whenever my views differed from Reginald's he would become demanding and coercive in an attempt to change my point of view to align with his. Dutton and Painter described how when this control is challenged, "the masked dependency of the dominator on the subjugated person is suddenly revealed" (1993, p. 107). I personally saw how Reginald would often take extreme measures to regain control; with the use of physical and emotional abuse. Dutton and Painter revealed, this violence on the part of the abuser "serves to maintain a power differential [especially when] threats against the woman and her children" (1993, p. 107) are made. This results in a "generalized feeling of powerlessness [which] can serve to maintain the relationship homeostasis" (Dutton & Painter, 1993, p. 107). Within this paradigm the abuser must regain control at any cost to continue his façade of omnipotence and to avoid underlying feelings of powerlessness. I find this thought provoking because I felt powerless in these situations. I never imagined that his motivation stemmed from Reginald's own sense of powerlessness.

Dutton and Painter (1993) tested their theory of traumatic bonding and emotional attachments in male partner violence and found that “when a woman finally leaves an abusive relationship, [although] her immediate fears may begin to subside, her hidden attachment to her abuser” (p. 117) often begins to manifest itself. Dutton and Painter noted that “at this particular point in time, the woman is emotionally drained and vulnerable” (1993, p. 117) while the man is calm, caring and friendly. While her husband is displaying this pleasant demeanor, over time her fear subsides when “the needs fulfilled by her husband increase, and equilibrium point is reached and she suddenly and impulsively decides to return” (Dutton & Painter, 1993, p. 117). Wallace’s (1999) explanation concurred with the above description and added that with formation of this traumatic bond, “the abused partner becomes progressively more attached to the abuser and [becomes more] intent on modifying him” (p. 185). I absolutely did this and believed that I had some sort of power to control his outbursts. Each time we separated my goal was to change Reginald so that he would treat me with respect. I wanted so much to change him so he could accept my love and the love of his family. Living and parenting alone was overwhelming so when Reginald promised to be more helpful and respectful I returned with the hope of being a united family.

The traumatic bonding theory sheds light on the convoluted nature of male partner violence and why it is difficult to leave. It does not; however, take into account societal messages that pressure men and women to behave in socially accepted ways. Men are collectively socialized to demonstrate power especially over women, to be the protector, to make decisions without help, and to view women as property (Cohen, 2010). While women are expected to be submissive, pleasers, and not get angry. Women in relationships with men are expected to be faithful, loyal, caretakers, and to remember that what the man wants is more important (Morgan,

2000). I held the viewpoint for most of my marriage, Reginald's desires and demands superseded mine. While I no longer ascribe to the belief that to keep a man a woman must give him what he wants, physically, sexually, and domestically; however, this accepted stance continues to be upheld in dominant society through media, advertising, and television.

I left Reginald on three occasions. The first time was after Reginald repeatedly ordered me to "get the hell out of here" and the second time was because Reginald was dating other women while I was pregnant with Rose. I did not return after I left him the third time. I did not return because Reginald had struck Dianthus on the head and my sister was going to report the abuse to Social Services if I did return. The traumatic bonding theory describes a characteristic behaviour of a woman living with male partner violence; to leave and return several times before making the final break. Wozniak and Allen (2013) reported "about one-third of women who leave an abuser will return" (p. 24) which corroborates my personal experience.

Traumatic bonding theory fails to explain how women do leave and move on with their lives because it focuses on why women stay and neglects to look at other perspectives. Although Reginald was willing to make changes, I no longer trusted that he would abandon his violent and coercive behaviour. I wrote in my journal about how difficult it was at times to single parent on my own and how desperate and alone I felt. On many occasions I had a desire to return; however, our third and final separation was permanent.

In my journal dated *Saturday, March 6, 1999, 12:32 a.m.*

I'm feeling so sad and lonely, really pathetic. I'm having such a difficult time going to sleep at night and then I'm wiped all day long.

I can't seem to shake off this lonely feeling. I want to phone Reginald and have him tell me how much he loves me and he wants me back. I told my counsellor on Wednesday that if I could go back to him without having to feel like I have my tail tucked between my legs, I would

go back. I keep thinking about the flower garden that I finally got so organized and how hard my life is here. Even though I am free, I am alone.

* * *

In 1981 Dutton and Painter's research revealed how "situational forces serve to bond women to their partner in intermittently abusive relationships" (Dutton & Painter, 1993, p. 141). They observed a combination of two unique features in these relationships: power imbalances and intermittent good-bad treatment. Like Dutton and Painter, Dugan and Hock (2006) described an abusive relationship as having included unequal power and intermittent abuse, but they also added two more features to these relationships: *cognitive dissonance* and *masking techniques*. According to Dugan and Hock (2006) cognitive dissonance is a psychological discomfort caused by holding two contradictory beliefs at the same time. In my case, my expectations of how relationships should be didn't match what I actually underwent on a sporadic regular, basis. Dugan and Hock masking techniques explained how I masked the abuse by blaming something else such as his financial stress, or his difficult childhood as a way of masking the real issue, that he chose to be abusive. I often doubted myself, took responsibility for his behaviour, making excuses and justifying his irrational conduct. I relate a story regarding what I personally experienced.

*Reginald is outside doing chores, rolling out straw, carrying chop, and feeding the cows.
It is 40 below Celsius.*

Reginald walks in the house cold and tired. "What have you been doing all day?" he asks.

"I just got Rose down for a nap" I answer.

"That's all you've done today? You are so lazy. You just sit around and hang your tits out for that baby all day long. You have no idea how cold it is outside." He bellows.

“Yes Reginald I know it is cold outside. Rose isn’t feeling well and I took me a long time to get her settled.” I said softly in an attempt to soothe him while I explained.

“You are so useless. You have no idea how hard I work. You should go outside and see for yourself how cold it is outside.” He rages as he points to the door.

“Really Reginald I know how cold it is outside and I appreciate how hard you work.” I reply.

“You have no idea you useless fucking cunt. Get dressed and get your ass outside and see for yourself what kind of weather I have to work in.” Reginald screams as he walks toward me.

“Please don’t make me go outside.” I beg. “I believe you. It is very cold outside.”

“Get dressed right now or I’ll throw you outside without your coat and boots.” he insists.

“Really, I believe you Reginald there is no need for me to go outside. Rose is asleep. I don’t want to wake her. Please keep your voice down.” I am pleading in a soft frantic voice hoping I can convince him to change his mind.

“I am serious Sherrie either you go outside dressed up or you go outside without clothes I don’t care but you are going out there. Seriously hurry up you lazy bitch.” Reginald rages. As he walks closer to me I begin putting on winter clothing and he stops. Tears fall down my cheeks as I put on my ski pants, winter coat, scarf, boots, and hat. “You stay out there for at least ten minutes so you understand how cold it is and you appreciate how hard I work for this family.” He warns.

Feeling full of despair I walk outside and the cold bites my wet cheeks. I begin walking and thinking about my life. It is hopeless; no matter what I do Reginald is angry at me. Maybe I should have had a pot of coffee on and baked him a cake, and then he wouldn’t have been so angry. The house is a mess. I didn’t have a chance to clean; I was spending precious time with

Rose. She is such a treasure but it sure is a challenge to get her to have a nap. I think about how much I love my girls, Dianthus and Rose. I keep walking down the hill of our approach as I cry and think about what a mess my life is with Reginald. I should do more, I think but I am already away in the city so much working 30 hours a week. There is so much work on the farm and Reginald works so hard, I can understand his frustration. Why does he have to take it out on me? I try to help him, I buy the groceries and I even put gas in the car from the city. I don't ask him for anything. I continue to walk and think and cry each step through the deep cold snow is challenging. Nothing I do makes him happy and I can't keep living like this. I plop over into the snow filled ditch and lay there staring into the sky. I just want to die. If I die then he won't have anyone to yell at and I won't have to listen to it anymore. I will just lay here until I freeze to death. I cry even harder, all I have to do is just fall asleep and let death take me. No more fighting no more Reginald. What about Dianthus and Rose? They need me! I have to be brave for them I have to get up out of this ditch and go back to the house, I decide. Feeling stiff and cold I get myself up and walk back up the hill of our approach and walk back into the house.

"Where have you been?" Reginald asks. "I have been worried about you."

Confused I reply, "You told me to go outside."

"Not for this long. You were gone for two hours." Reginald informs me.

As I unwind the scarf from around my face and neck, take off my hat, coat, boots, and ski pants Reginald notices. "You've got frost bite on your neck Sherrie." I missed a spot under my chin with the scarf and my neck is white with frostbite. "Why did you stay out there for so long?" Reginald inquires. "I never meant for you to get hurt Sherrie. I just want you to understand how hard I work."

My mind is a mess, I feel confused. 'Reginald seems genuinely worried about me.' I think to myself. 'Maybe I just blew it all out of proportion. I should have just gone out for ten minutes like he told me.'

Years later I contemplate why this defining moment was not the catalyst for my leaving this unhealthy marriage. Clearly I wasn't thinking logically. 'How could I be so compliant?' I wonder. I feel numb. I convince myself that I overreacted. I took sole responsibility, making excuses and justifying his behaviour. I realize now how my thinking was irrational due to the trauma and abuse I experienced. This is an embarrassing story to share and while I feel shame reliving it, I relay it to illustrate the features involved in traumatic bonding.

Another important topic discussed in the literature on male partner violence is the concept of *learned helplessness*. This is another reason for staying in an abusive relationship.

Learned helplessness

I struggle on a personal level with the term learned helplessness when applied to a woman in a violent intimate relationship. I explain my difficulty with this concept later in the chapter. Maier and Seligman (1976) described learned helplessness as: having a lack of motivation to the point of becoming debilitatingly passive, to having poor coping skills for problem-solving, and having experienced emotional trauma where an overwhelming sense of powerlessness resulted. Walker (1984) was the first researcher to apply Maier and Seligman's theoretical construct of learned helplessness to battered women in order to explain why women stay in abusive intimate relationships. Mills (1998) referred to Walker's theory of learned helplessness when she proposed that a woman living with male partner violence often will "become demoralized and paralyzed by fear . . . [and] unable to take the steps necessary to improve their situation" (p. 104). Mills also pointed out that there is a "tendency for battered

women to believe in the omnipotence, or strength, of their mates and thus feel that any attempt to resist them is hopeless” (1998, p. 124). While I definitely felt hopeless at times, my friends, family, and spiritual beliefs sustained my hope and gave me the strength to persist.

Learned helplessness can be viewed as a “psychological affect from continued exposure to an abusive partner” (Wozniak & Allen, 2013, p. 28). An alternate term, *learned powerlessness* reflects the impact upon a woman’s self-image and sense of self-confidence being corroded in a similar manner to brainwashing (Wozniak & Allen, 2013). I continue to struggle with this term because while I did have an eroded sense of self-efficacy I was still able to leave Reginald and reclaim my personal power. This process took time, education, and much support, but I have been able to leave all Reginald’s distorted messages in the past.

I agree with Bowker’s (1993) objection to the term learned helplessness because it implies a psychological dysfunction. While extended exposure to male partner violence does affect the psychological well-being of a woman, it is not a failure on the part of the woman’s mental state, but rather a reaction to living with a perverse reality. Male partner violence is a result of systemic societal issues that label women as helpless and serve to re-victimize women rather than acknowledge their sophisticated survival skills (Bowker, 1993). The reality is when a woman attempts to permanently leave her abuser, she faces many obstacles to starting life over alone (Bowker, 1993). For example, Beattie and Shaghnessy (2004) shared startling statistics from the United States regarding the danger women are exposed to when they leave their abusers: “Over 50% of women who leave violent relationships are followed, harassed, or further attacked by their estranged partner” (p. 19).

It is a widely accepted fact that the most dangerous time, for a woman who has experienced male partner violence, is when she permanently leaves her partner. As I became

more aware of this danger I weighed the potential risk I was taking by leaving Reginald forever. I was genuinely afraid harm may come to my children or me when I left. Fear is powerful and can paralyze. Perhaps the reasons a woman stays are more related to inherent survival skills rather than being helpless. I had seen Reginald become violent in an instant with very little warning. One example was when he and his brother Manny had a contradictory opinion on who had the right to use the tractor they had jointly purchased.

"I've come to take the tractor. I need it to pull the cultivator on my land." Manny informs Reginald.

"That tractor stays where it is." Reginald snaps back.

"You're not using it what's the problem?" Manny asks.

"I am going to need it and I don't want to have to track it down when you go back to work." Reginald snips.

"I just need it for a few days; after all we bought it together." Manny responds trying to keep Reginald calm.

"Don't you go anywhere near that tractor?" Reginald warns.

"Be reasonable Reginald. I'll bring it back for you to use in a couple of days." Manny pleads.

Reginald storms into the house to grab the shotgun and begins waving it at Manny.

"What the hell do you think you are doing? Are you going crazy?" Manny asks as he backs up.

"Get the hell of my land." Reginald screams lifting the gun up toward Manny.

Manny backs away, "I am part owner of the tractor. I have a right to use it too, I'll be back." He says as he gets in his truck and drives away.

I shudder as I recall the heated emotionality of this incident. From this perilous point in time I internalized that if Reginald felt threatened or abandoned he could pull out his rifle to coerce me into submitting to his demands. I feared for my safety and the safety of the girls when I chose to leave my marriage. I was comforted that the judge was concerned for my safety in his May 15, 2001, judgment he pronounced:

I am convinced that continued access must be supervised until such a time when it appears that the respondent [Reginald] has demonstrated that such supervision is unnecessary. Indeed I am particularly concerned about access over the immediate period of time during which the respondent will have to accept the fact that he must deliver one-half of his farm to the petitioner (Q. B. Section 38).

Bowker (1993) described the following particulars women face when leaving their abuser: “worse battering . . . harm to the children . . . starvation and homelessness . . . shame, failure, and public sin . . . [and] loss of social identity and one’s entire way of life” (p. 158). I share my personal lived experience regarding each of these issues.

Addressing worse battering, I often feared that Reginald would point a rifle at me and the girls. I did experience Reginald’s anger in the form of being taught a lesson after returning from a period of estrangement. For instance, after I returned following our first separation Reginald would no longer acknowledge our wedding anniversary saying, “If you would have stayed then we could celebrate our anniversary. It’s no longer our real anniversary any more, you ruined it for yourself.” After the third and final time I left Reginald told Dianthus in a telephone conversation, “I grabbed that damn Angora rabbit out of the cage, threw him on the ground. The dogs ripped it to pieces. That will teach him for eating the babies.” When I raised the rabbits, I would separate the male Angora rabbit from the mother when she was close to giving birth because it is natural for the male to attack the babies. Reginald knew how much the rabbits meant to me. I suspected he relayed the story to Dianthus because I refused to communicate with

him. I held Dianthus as she cried for hours in an attempt to soothe her while she dealt with the horror of this image in her mind. Horrifying Dianthus in this manner hurt me as well.

The issue of harm to the children led me to the vulnerable socioeconomic position due to maintaining it was in our children's best interest that I receive sole custody. I vowed to do what I had to do to keep Dianthus, Rose, and Buttercup safe from further harm. This involved me arguing for supervised visitation in the custody and access portion of the trial. I incurred exorbitant legal fees totaling \$ 95,000 dollars to keep my three children safe from future abuse. I faced threats from Reginald. I remember hearing him say, "If you don't back off I will go for full custody of the girls and I have a 99 percent chance of winning because of you withholding them from me."

I can relate to the distress and threat of starvation and homelessness. We left the farm with little more than the clothes on our back. We lived in situational poverty for several years; relying heavily on the church's generosity for providing us with monthly food hampers. We initially lived in Adelle House for 18 months after which I was challenged with acquiring subsidized housing. I say challenged because identifying myself as a woman who had experienced male partner violence became a barrier for the acceptance of my application to subsidized housing. The first three years we lived on social assistance and the next five years we lived on student loans while I went to university to attain a Bachelor of Education degree. Reginald paid minimal child support and only paid regularly when it became mandated through maintenance enforcement.

Shame, failure, and public sin are all part of my lived experience. I felt a sense of failure and shame due to religious and cultural beliefs about being unable to keep my family together. Being married in the Catholic Church was a source of pride. I was an active member of my

church, and I left with the social stigma that I was now a single mother and a divorced woman. This was extremely difficult to overcome for the first several years after leaving Reginald and moving to Saskatoon.

In my journal dated Sunday December 21, 1998 I write: *I'm on social assistance (welfare) I am having a hard time with it because I don't want to be the stereotype even though I know I only am if I allow myself to be.*

I experienced a loss of social identity and my entire way of life. I no longer could call myself a farmer or a married woman. I no longer could refer to rural Saskatchewan as my home, because now we lived in the city. I left behind my belongings, my home, and my community. I was a member of the local school board and I was very active in my community, with established friendships with neighbours. I had pride in my connection to my community. I left behind all these relationships; I also abandoned all my childhood pictures and personal memorabilia.

In my journal dated Saturday April 10, 1999 I write: *I'm grateful for the two policemen coming with us to the farm to collect some of our things. It gave us strength. I'm grateful for the experience to get the closure I was needing to say goodbye to the farm, the house, the way of life. Driving to Saskatoon was like being on a boat with the waves splashing behind us as we drove looking to the horizon ahead.*

What I find refreshing is how Bowker (1993) recognized women who have survived male partner violence “were not nearly as passive as they had been portrayed in the literature” (p. 155) rather she found them to be resourceful, strong, and determined. Bowker discovered women typically spent much time and attention on creating an atmosphere free from violence. There are many reasons I stayed in my marriage for so long. As I weave through the literature I attempt to unravel the intertwined threads of my lived experience with Reginald. I find clues in what is referred to as the *cycle of violence*.

* * *

Cycle of violence

In 1979 Lenore Walker researched battering incidents to learn about what keeps women in abusive intimate relationships. She developed a theory, now referred to as the Walker Cycle of Violence. Walker noted how this cyclical “tension-reduction theory” (2009, p. 91) had three distinct stages or phases. The Cycle of Violence has become widely accepted in domestic abuse literature and is commonly used in psychoeducational groups to help men and women gain awareness of the convoluted dynamics and patterns found in male partner violence.

The first phase is “tension-building accompanied with a rising sense of danger” (Walker, p. 91). Often this phase is referred to as “walking on eggshells,” which conveys the eerie feeling of impending doom common in this phase. Retrospectively, I can identify with this phase in my marriage. During this phase I would quietly be submissive as I received numerous dirty looks from Reginald. During the second phase “the acute battering incident,” (Walker, 2009, p. 91) I recall being grabbed, pushed, held down, blocked from leaving. I recall objects being thrown or smashed, yelling and screaming would ensue, creating an atmosphere of intense fear. In the third phase “loving-contrition,” (Walker, 2009, p. 91) life was normal, even pleasant at times. These moments would elicit the memory of the man I married; Reginald was kind, attentive, considerate, and loving. Reginald would even go out of his way to do something special for me, like take me to the city for supper and a movie, something we rarely did near the end of our marriage. This phase is commonly referred to as hearts and flowers because this would be the time when a woman would receive flowers and professions of love. I loved receiving flowers! I still do.

Walker’s Cycle of Violence has been widely accepted in the area of domestic violence; however, there are versions of it that have been expanded. One such adaptation is a four-phase

cycle that includes “increasing stress and tension; violent outburst; remorse and requests for forgiveness; and, calm or loving respite or honeymoon” (Deaton & Hertica, 2001, p. 9). This adaptation separates the guilt and fear of reprisal aspect included in the loving contrition phase of Walker’s theory. Everstine and Everstine (2006) described the psychological dynamics involved in male partner violence, emphasizing that “many battering husbands love their mates; on occasion they feel tremendous remorse, and some even make great demonstrations of affection after an attack” (p. 89).

More often; however, remorse and requests for forgiveness typically has little to do with feeling guilty or remorseful for harm done to an intimate partner, and much to do with a fear of reprisal. Rather the ultimate goal of the abuser is to silence the woman and prevent her for speaking publically about the abuse she suffered at his hand. It is common for a man to justify and rationalize his behavior by blaming the woman. When this process is repeated over a period of time, it is common for the woman’s thinking to become “distorted in a way similar to that of the victims of brainwashing, in that she begins to accept whatever the abusive spouse tells her” (Everstine & Everstine, p. 90). I kept silent about the full extent of abuse I suffered on a daily basis.

While some authors argue that the Cycle of Violence is a “predictable pattern apparent in some cases of intimate partner violence in which the perpetrator alternates between use of reinforcements and punishments in his/her quest for control” (Kilmartin & Allison, 2007, p. 240). Others believe that “women often do not know when abusive or violent acts are going to occur, and the men’s behavior [is] experienced as random, and coercive” (Wilcox, 2006, p. 25). Bancroft (2002) referred to this cyclical pattern of behaviour as the “abusive man’s cycles” (p. 147) where his actions in the hearts and flowers stage would have the effect of pulling a woman

into this “repetitive traumatic cycle” (p. 148). When Reginald showed me kindness and compassion I had hope that he would really change this time. Then the abuse would begin all over again. These random, violent acts are deliberate rewards and punishments administered by male partners to assert power and control over their partners. Wilcox noted “when women continued to resist their male partner’s wishes they often experienced more ‘severe’ (in the sense of more physically violent rather than implying a hierarchy of severity) violence” (p. 25). This pattern of power and control typically becomes more dangerous over time resulting in seriousness and effects of abuse escalating with each subsequent cycle. Thus this pattern can also be described as a spiral, at its worst the spiral ends in the death of the woman. Bancroft (2002) pointed out that some men do not follow a pattern. He shared, “I have had clients who seemed to almost get a thrill out of their own unpredictability, which further increased their power” (p. 150). Even when I was submissive and compliant I experienced emotional and psychological abuse. Over time as I began to stand up to him, I became more afraid and uncertain of my safety.

After having no success with simply expressing my concerns, I was no longer willing to tolerate Reginald’s disrespectful and abusive behaviour. I think about how I attempted to describe why I would no longer tolerate Reginald’s violent ranting during cross-examination with Reginald’s lawyer at the trial.

Q- Mervin Kemp—Now, you’re saying, if I understand your testimony correctly here, you’re saying this first separation you felt was Reginald’s fault because he was continually telling you to leave. And you therefore felt, well, Reginald is responsible for the separation that you had that first time?

A- Me—It was my choice to leave. He told me every time we had a fight, every time I didn’t do what he wanted me to, to get out. And he would say, “Get the hell out of here now,” pointing, yelling, screaming, over and over and over again (Q. B. Div. No. 711 305-306, 2001).

Recalling this event and now reexamining it I wonder, why I didn't leave on the many occasions Reginald told me to "Get the hell out of here now" (Q. B. Div. No. 711 306, 2001). Reginald was clearly distraught, but did he really want me to leave? I found these episodes perplexing, frightening, and exhausting. Upon recurrent torrent of verbal assaults, I left feeling drained, disillusioned, and disheartened. Even thinking about it now, 15 years later, it leaves me feeling exhausted; my body trembles as I recall the terror I felt every time I heard Reginald yell at me.

* * *

So how does this all fit together? Reginald ordering me out of the house and my feeling dazed as I held on to my sanity in this surreal experience. It didn't make sense to me when I lived it and it certainly didn't make sense when I was forced to defend myself in the courtroom. Once again my thoughts pull me back into the courtroom where my testimony is given in cross-examination with Reginald's lawyer. He repeatedly questions whether I had been depressed thus implying I had a mental illness. If I had a mental illness or I was depressed would Reginald then have a valid reason to be abusive?

Q- But, as well, you know, like, usually, both people are arguing, both people are fighting, both people are saying things to each other. And are you saying you're entirely innocent of these separations?

A- I've never claimed to be entirely innocent. I did not tell him to leave and to get out of the house though.

Q- Okay. But my understanding is that before the separation you were quite depressed to the point where you had a hard time even being motivated to do anything around the house. No interest in Reginald, no interest in the house, no interest in, basically, anything. And that would lead to arguments. Is there any truth to that?

A- I don't recall being depressed. I remember Reginald calling me "lazy," "stupid," "fat," and so forth, but I don't remember being depressed. I continued to do my daily tasks (Q. B. Div. No. 711 306-307, 2001).

Thinking about how I felt sitting in the courtroom being forced to defend myself, a creepy feeling shudders down my spine. I feel insulted that Reginald's lawyer called it two people fighting, it wasn't a fair fight; most of the time I didn't even know what we were fighting about. Reginald stood there yelling at me as I stood there confused. Is that fighting? If I would have told Reginald to get out of the house he would have laughed in my face. I did not have the physical strength to force him out the door, but I never did ask him to leave. I just wanted our marriage to be healthy and mutually respectful.

No matter what I did or didn't do, Reginald continued to berate me. If I were depressed I would have been unable "to do my daily tasks" (Q. B. Div. No. 711 307, 2001) right? Dugan and Hock (2006) highlighted, "a key sign of more serious depression is that it is interfering noticeably with your daily activities" (p. 177). Frequently on edge, I felt intimidated by Reginald's physical strength. I believe now that how I reacted was rational in this irrational situation. What was Reginald trying to accomplish by convincing others that I suffered from depression? Although I was not depressed, I was distraught and I did distance myself from Reginald in reaction his relentless verbal assaults.

Evans (2012) claimed that "verbal abuse is an attempt to control [the female partner]," which leaves the woman feeling confused, even if she had become accustomed to the verbal assaults or had been persuaded that she somehow deserved to be treated this way. The woman's "spirit and sense of self are eroded," leaving her feeling hollow (Evans, 2012, p. 4). Engel (2002) agreed with this view and added, "Just assuredly as physical violence assaults the body, verbal abuse assaults the mind and spirit, causing wounds that are extremely difficult to heal" (p. 28).

She described how “yelling and screaming is not only demeaning, it is frightening as well” Evans explained that “When someone yells at us, we become afraid that he or she may also resort to physical violence” (2012, p. 28). I was afraid during these violent episodes and I continued to be afraid of Reginald for years. I am still uncomfortable when I see him. Does this make me crazy or paranoid? Does this give someone an excuse or reason to abuse me?

* * *

My life with Reginald on the farm was indeed ominous and I often felt anxious. I felt reassured as Dugan and Hock (2006) stated how “nothing is wrong or crazy about suffering from anxiety” when dealing with abuse. In reality I was “dealing with difficult, painful, and often frightening issues” (p. 179). Brown (1995) credited “the negative synergy of trauma and silence, abuse and secrecy”, as the stimulus for my feeling crazy, “when in fact it was mainly the context in which [I was] forced to operate that was pathological” (p. 153). I was unhappy, sad, and yes at times depressed although not clinically. I was in a violent marriage. I felt threatened, intimidated, and isolated on a regular basis.

Sonkin et al. (1985) described how women typically are in a state of confusion. It was difficult to believe what was really happening; Reginald, the man I love also claimed to love me, so how could he treat me this way? I would often dismiss Reginald’s unusual behaviour or explain it away, especially when he would apologize and promise to treat me respectfully. I would believe him, forgive him, and think about how I may have contributed to his outburst and attempt to not do it again (p. 11). Many times I accepted blame for Reginald’s ranting. I would often think ‘If only I would have done the dishes sooner he wouldn’t have gotten so angry’.

I appreciate how Wilcox (2006) asserted how abuse does not have a recognizable pattern. When I read Weiss’ (2004) eloquent explanation for how unaware she was about the cycle of

violence concept I felt a sense of relief. When I started my healing process by attending psychoeducational groups, I finally was able to identify this destructive pattern in my marriage. I watched as domestic abuse experts illustrated the cycle of violence by “drawing diagrams of perfect rectangles and circles, models of clarity and precision, to illustrate this pattern of abuse” (Weiss, 2004, p. 27). I never saw any patterns when I was in the marriage, it was only after I left that I was able to identify some of these patterns. There were good times when Reginald was the man I fell in love with, loving and attentive. There were uneasy times when there was tension in the air, when I would go out of my way to attempt to anticipate Reginald’s wants and needs. Here were surreal times when I wondered if I had been somehow become part of a *Twilight Zone* episode, because what was happening was simply bizarre. I had no idea that there was any sort of pattern to all of this unpredictable behaviour. Male partner violence is never that simple or clean. The reality is if it really was that simple we (society, women, men, researchers) would have answers to the many questions that arise from male partner violence. Questions like: Why does she stay? Why does he hit? Why does she go back? Why does he promise to never use violence again and then justify his use of violence? Why does society believe this is a family matter? There is this societal acceptance that what goes on behind closed doors is a “private matter.” Why does society continue to blame the victim?

I experienced societal judgment personally by family and friends. I would hear comments like, “If it’s really that bad then why don’t you leave?” I recall hearing “I would never put up with that.” When I read Weiss’s (2004) personal story it resonated with me because she spoke to the societal judgment women face and the constant question *why don’t you leave?* This question assigns responsibility to the woman for staying in an unhealthy and abusive relationship rather than attempting to unravel the complexities involved when a woman contemplates leaving.

Weiss (2004) formulated a rationale into this query including typical societal responses, she presents:

Common wisdom used to be: ‘Well, if he beat her up, she must have done something to deserve it.’ These days everyone is more sophisticated; no one would ever say a woman deserves to be abused. But the blame is still there: ‘She should have called a therapist.’ ‘She should have called her mother.’ ‘She should have called the police.’ ‘She should have been more assertive.’ ‘She should have been more accommodating.’ ‘She should have just walked out.’ When people hear that a woman is being abused, they say *she should*—never *he should*. They say, ‘Why doesn’t she just leave?’ not ‘Why doesn’t he just stop?’ (pp. 20-21)

The ironic thing about all these judgmental comments is I remember wondering; did I do something to deserve being treated this way? I spoke to many therapists. I talked to my mother and siblings about what was going on in my life. I didn’t experience the type of physical abuse that would warrant phoning the police. In fact I recall telling Reginald, “If you ever hit me I will leave you.” He came close on a few occasions but he never did hit me. When I attempted to be more assertive my life with Reginald became more volatile. If I was any more accommodating I could have been a rug. I did walk out on three occasions and still the abuse continued.

I recall thinking, ‘if Reginald would just treat us well, if he would just stop, we could be a happy family.’ Leaving was the last thing on my mind—after all, why would I have married him if I were going to just leave? When Reginald would promise, “Tell me what you want me to do. I’ll be different. I just want us to be a happy family” my heart would get sucked in and my body went along for the ride. Weiss admitted to being outraged thinking about how insulting it is to ask a woman, *why don’t you just leave?* While I found it difficult to express my anger, I can empathize with her emotional response. Weiss culminated her rationale by comparing the absurdness of this question, “To me, this question is as meaningless as asking the victim of a

train wreck, ‘Why didn’t you just drive to work this morning’” (2004, pp. 20-21)? I felt a sense of relief when I read this, because attempting to answer this question continually mystifies me, yet people continue to ask me this question. Last week, when I was asked, “Why did you stay for so long?” my response was ambiguous, “It is a difficult question to answer.” I can’t articulate why I took so long to leave but when I left the third time it was because I chose to keep my children safe and the thought of losing them gave me the courage not to go back. I recognized and expressed “This isn’t the way it is supposed to be. My dream of a happy family life didn’t look like this!”

Negative Outcome of Chronic Violence

I felt reassured as Vitanza, Vogel, and Marshall’s (1995) cautioned how “we should neither minimize nor maximize the consequences of psychological abuse and violence” (p. 31). Lundberg-Love and Marmion (2006) declared that, “being battered by one’s partner definitely constitutes a traumatic event” (p. 43). I lived in a second-stage housing unit for women who had experienced male partner violence for 18 months after leaving Reginald. It took many months before I could sleep peacefully through the night after I moved to Saskatoon. I would often awake from a terrifying dream that Reginald was chasing me; I would often wake up startled and covered in sweat. It also took several months before I was able to cry, as I had numbed my emotions to protect myself from the horror of the violence in my marriage. Wiehe (1998) hypothesized that women who have experienced male partner violence are significantly at risk for developing *post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)*.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

Astin and Lawrence (1993) demonstrated that the emotional abuse and betrayal experienced by women frequently result in symptoms of PTSD. Lundberg-Love and Wilkerson

(2006) described symptoms of PTSD, which included “the re-experiencing of painful recollections of the traumatic event, flashbacks, nightmares, sleep difficulties, memory and concentration problems, numbing of emotions, exaggerated startle response, and avoidance of stimuli reminiscent of the trauma” (p. 43). Astin and Lawrence (1993) noted women experienced psychological secondary symptoms: “Anxiety, depression, memory loss, cognitive dissociations, re-experiencing of the traumatic event when exposed to associated stimuli, feelings of helplessness, sleep and appetite disturbances, fatigue, listlessness, self-imposed isolation, and disruption of interpersonal relationships” (p. 17). Again many of these resonated with me personally. Anxiety was a constant companion as I struggled to feel comfortable parenting alone living on social assistance while dealing with legal issues and court proceedings.

Saunders (1994) suggested that developing specific symptom profiles has several advantages, because “knowing what aspects of PTSD are characteristic of battered women and other trauma groups can help define the disorder more clearly” (p. 31). Also and perhaps more significantly it helps women who have experienced male partner violence understands that they are not “going crazy” (Saunders, 1994, p. 31); but are exhibiting symptoms of PTSD. The descriptions of PTSD are helpful because I often doubted my reality and questioned my responses. I found the research by Lundberg-Love and Wilkerson (2006) comforting; their data suggested “that 40 to 60 percent of battered women develop PTSD” (p. 43). Saunders (1994) concluded that “the evaluation of specific interventions for PTSD will be needed in order to improve our ability to reduce the psychic pain that does not end when the violence ends” (p. 42).

Unfortunately; however, when survivors are labeled with a formal diagnosis it tends to pathologize women instead of moving them toward a “strength-based identity” (Goodman & Epstein, 2008, p. 57) which may prove more harmful than helpful. Goodman and Epstein (2008)

realized women can feel diminished by being labeled with a disorder. Nevertheless, they stressed how “most mental health professionals—even many feminist practitioners—find the concept of PTSD extremely useful” (Goodman & Epstein, 2008, p. 57) when helping women in this situation. Martinez-Torteya et al. (2009) highlighted the reality of women who have experienced male partner violence and its impact on their lives, explaining how this violence does increase the “risk of mental health symptoms and influences women’s social, emotional, and behavioral adaptation” (p. 719). Often seen in cases of male partner violence, the violence continues for years after a woman physically leaves the relationship. For this reason, I believe it is important to mention *complex post-traumatic stress disorder (C-PTSD)*.

Complex post-traumatic stress disorder (C-PTSD)

While I was never diagnosed with PTSD or C-PTSD I did experience psychological and emotional abuse long after I formally left my marriage, through ongoing threats, gruelling legal actions, and financial stress. I personally find acknowledging and understanding the symptoms enlightening and helpful. I also believe it is important to mention because Herman (1992) recognized PTSD did not encapsulate all exposure to traumatic events. Many women who have lived with male partner violence over a long period of time could possibly suffer from C-PTSD; however, generally these women would have also experienced childhood trauma (i.e. childhood exposure to domestic violence). Herman explained clinical observations revealed how there are three areas of personal disruption which surpass simple PTSD:

The first is symptomatic: the symptom picture in survivors of prolonged trauma often appears to be more complex, diffuse, and tenacious than in simple PTSD. The second is characterological: survivors of prolonged abuse develop characteristic personality changes, including deformations of relatedness and identity. The third area involves survivor’s vulnerability to repeated harm, both self-inflicted and at the hands of others. (1992, p. 379)

This diagnosis; however, is limited because it continues to situate the trauma a woman has experienced in the past.

It is commonly recognized that the most dangerous time for a woman is during the period of time she permanently leaves her partner. From the moment a woman contemplates leaving she experiences ongoing stress coupled with past trauma. Even after a woman leaves her abusive partner often there are ongoing threats regarding the children around visitation or child support, stalking, harassment, verbal and/or physical violence, and stress regarding perpetual legal actions. Being aware of how extensive and long-term exposure to violence paired with past childhood trauma could lead to C-PTSD is helpful in a therapeutic relationship with a woman who has experienced male partner violence. Then again when ongoing violence exists, *continuous traumatic stress (CTS)* may be a more appropriate description.

Continuous traumatic stress (CTS)

Straker contended how CTS has a place in the trauma field. She explained the context of CTS is defined as the presence of stressors which are in “the present and are continuous with stressors in the past and future. The stressors are extreme, multiple, and encompassing in the sense that individuals cannot easily escape them” (p. 214). I appreciate and respect how Straker and the team of anti-apartheid mental health practitioners gave consideration to how the term CTS would be more helpful to those suffering from the trauma of apartheid and civil conflict. Straker (2013) validated Herman’s (1992) work for pointing out how trauma is linked to political affairs. Although, Straker recognized how referring to it as syndrome or disorder could adversely impact those they were trying to help. Thirty years ago in the 1980’s “there was a greater stigma attached to mental health issues than is currently the case” argued Straker (2013, p. 210). I

respectfully disagree; for women being diagnosed with mental health issues stigma continues to be a problematic.

Straker (2013) confirmed that many challenges arise in this perplexing therapeutic relationship. Counsellors must collaboratively assist women to be able to distinguish between “real from imagined dangers” (Straker, p. 212). In this way the therapist and patient work collectively to fashion safe niches where the woman can rest and regenerate in order to deal with ongoing existent threats (Straker, 2013).

While I was going through the initial phase of separation, divorce, and court proceedings I was deemed a suitable candidate for the ADT Domestic Violence Emergency Response Service (DVERS) program. This program is made available to ‘high risk’ victims of violence. When I first moved out of Adelle House I applied for and was granted access to this service free of charge. My townhouse was fitted with home security and as well I carried a portable DVERS device when I worked outside in the yard. Although no violent episodes ensued, I felt calmer and slept peacefully knowing I had an alarm system at my side. The DVERS program offered validation for being anxious and frightened during this dangerous transitional period, it also permitted me to move past the trauma and on with a life free from violence.

* * *

I am comforted by Weiss’s (2004) account of how she spent over “twenty years trying to unravel the threads of physical and psychological violence that made up the fabric” (p. 20) of her marriage. Comforted because I left 15 years ago and although I have moved on and my life is primarily happy, safe, and free from abuse, there continues to be times when something will evoke a memory and twig an emotional or physical response.

* * *

I recently attended a family wedding. I knew Reginald would be there, I felt anxious about being in close proximity to him. I wanted to go to the wedding, I was not attending alone and yet I re-experienced physical reactions from traumatic memories of my life with Reginald. When I did see him, my body tensed intuitively as if it sensed danger: I became anxious, hyperaroused, my breathing became rapid, and my heart was beating so loudly I was sure everyone could hear it; LUB-DUB. LUB-DUB. LUB-DUB.

Developing an overwhelming urge to flee, I found refuge outside in the car. During my timeout I gave myself an affirming self-talk to assess the probability of real danger. I focused on calming my fears so I could rejoin my family and enjoy the wedding. When I returned to the hall Dianthus, Rose and Buttercup expressed their frustration with my behaviour and accused me of over-reacting, “Mom why do you have to act so weird when you and dad are in the same place?” Later when I felt composed I explained to them, “I feel like a rabbit being caught in a room with a coyote. No one would think it odd if a rabbit was terrified at the mere thought of this encounter.”

When contemplating why my physical reaction was so intense with an increase in my heart rate, a surge of hyper-arousal, escalation in anxiety, increased startle response to cues of possible violence, after writing about this episode and reiterative process of viewing of this manuscript, I recognize now that these are classic symptoms of PTSD. At the time I had a tough time appreciating why I was reacting so melodramatically in a safe environment surrounded by friends and family. I was only able to fully relax after Reginald left.

At the time of the wedding, it had been 12 years since I left this man, and yet my body remembered the pain it endured. Society tells us we must remain composed and act civil in these situations, but my body was reminding me that I had suffered; Reginald had inflicted that pain so

it was appropriate to feel afraid. I found validation in the literature regarding emotional and psychological abuse. Although PTSD is usually associated with experiencing extreme physical and sexual abuse, 63% of verbally abused women also meet the criteria for PTSD (Wiehe, 1998). Studies by Lundberg-Love (2006) and Wilkerson and Vitanza et al. (1995) found PTSD symptoms in women who had not endured physical violence.

The court process in itself is traumatizing due to the requirement of relaying past violence during the court proceedings thus reliving the prior trauma. It took over two years before the matter of child custody and division of property was heard in court, before that I endured a Custody and Access assessment, Examination for Discovery hearing, Pretrial Conference, a court appointed Provincial Mediation process, and after the week-long trial, Reginald applied to the Court of Appeal to review the judgment from the Court of Queen's Bench. This prolonged judicial journey extended over 8 years. The emotional and psychological toll has been enormous and without a doubt ongoing stress and continued traumatization.

During this time I would startle easily as I was constantly on the lookout for Reginald. I lived in fear that he would harm the girls and me. Issues regarding domestic violence are considered to be high conflict and generally take years to resolve within the court system. I seemed to be in a virtual state of exhaustion, but to be fair this was a grueling time of grieving, healing, and moving on. I struggled with recalling traumatic episodes and found it helpful to refer to my journals to aid in my recollection of these events.

When I read my journal 15 years later after leaving, I notice how I struggle internally with permanently leaving Reginald. I note in my journal feeling perplexed by this daunting process.

My journal dated *Tuesday, August 24, 1999, around 11 pm*

I have to believe and I know things will work out. I just have to believe in myself. I have done well and I can continue to do well. I know I can, but do I really? In the past I have had a tendency not to finish what I started, to fall short of completion. Maybe that's part of what's scaring me. I have an appointment with Bill (lawyer) on Thursday, hopefully to get the ball rolling. This is a very permanent thing I am doing. Divorce and Division of Property. Very Permanent.

I also feel so frustrated that no one (my family, friends, counsellor, and lawyer) seems to realize how difficult a task this all is. How much energy it takes. Reginald was a part of my identity. This is so very, very difficult, even though I know it is truly the right path in my life. I guess where I get lost is I don't know where the path will lead.

* * *

I am damned if I do continue living with male partner violence to maintain some financial security, and I am damned if I don't continue living with male partner violence to subject myself and my children to a life of poverty.

* * *

The girls and I loved and respected Reginald. He didn't have to use coercion tactics; we would have followed his leadership willingly. By leaving Reginald and breaking apart our family I was sentencing myself and the girls to a period of situational poverty. Payne (1996) noticed that people in this situation commonly have a great deal of pride as well as a reluctance to accept charity. People finding themselves in situational poverty tend to have more resources to help them through this temporary condition (Payne, 1996). I chose to leave my marriage and the financial stability of a two-parent household. This decision came with an emotional price. My life in situational poverty spanned over a decade. My desire to be a positive role model for my children gave me the courage to overcome many roadblocks.

Socioeconomic Challenge

In this story I juggle my immediate parental responsibilities, financial barriers, ongoing healing from trauma, being a positive role model for my children, and pursuing my dream of creating a financially sound future for my family. I invite you to sit with me as I wait in the dentist's office.

Cool air washes over me as I pull open the heavy glass door to the dentist's office. I am taking Rose for an appointment. I note the presence of easy listening music as I walk up to the smiling familiar receptionist. She is average height with long brown hair, big brown eyes, and a welcoming warm smile that spans her gentle face. After we exchange some small talk, she hands me the blue medical history paper on a clipboard. I sit down, scan it to verify there are no changes, and then sign and date it. I hand it back to her and sit back down. The smell of antiseptic is in the air, and I can hear the sounds of a dentist drill; I become aware of the distinct sound of suctioning. We have been seeing this dentist for about 10 years. He is gentle, patient, and soft-spoken. My children like the treats they get at each visit, especially the gum. As I sit waiting for Rose, I take a deep breath and feel tightness in my chest and notice my jaw is clenched. I attempt to push the uneasy feelings aside after noticing this tension in my body.

I am waiting for a call (a phone interview); my chest feels so heavy as I think about how important this interview is for my future and my ability to support my family.

I think back to the day I decided to leave Reginald. I asked my sister, Babette to drive to Dianthus's school to pick her up some 300 kilometres away from Saskatoon. When my sister picked Dianthus up from school she informed her half way to Saskatoon that she would not be returning to her life on the farm. She attempted to encourage her by saying, "just wait; you will get to meet the person I knew. Your mom was so full of life and had a great sense of humour." It

was so true that at the age of 37, I had become an empty shell of former myself, figuratively not literally because I was physically overweight. It took me until 2006, during an assignment in a counselling class, to realize that the extra weight I carried was a form of armour, which I had come to believe, would protect me from the sexual abuse I experienced during my marriage. I felt lost, alone, and full of despair. I was not able to cry because I had become so numb to protect myself from all the psychological and emotional abuse. I was unable to love my children the way they deserved to be loved. I needed to heal and allow myself to truly feel all my emotions, even the painful ones. To my surprise, it was only when I cried for myself and felt truly sad that could I move past the pain and begin to truly love my children and myself again. I reflect on this as I sit in the waiting room of the dentist's office.

As I wait in the dentist's office I continue to think about our move to Saskatoon. We lived on social assistance for three years while I took time to heal from the effects of male partner violence, deal with the legal issues of divorce, and adjust to my new life as a single parent. We initially moved in with my mom for a month until we were accepted into Adelle House. Adelle House is a twelve-unit apartment building for women who have experienced male partner violence. Programming was in place and included Tuesday evening support groups and counselling sessions with a social worker, who proved to be central to the beginning of my healing process.

I got a part-time job at a nearby florist shop and worked there on Saturdays for the 18 months that I lived at Adelle House. This income supplemented my social assistance.

After I moved out of Adelle House and into subsidized housing, I was hired at a grocery store floral department. I worked for five weeks in the floral department for \$6.90 an hour. I had managed the floral department in a grocery store five years earlier and was paid \$14.90 an

hour. I was informed that because it had been more than two years since I worked for this company they could not give me the same wage. The store manager shared that he felt uncomfortable with this arrangement because it was apparent to him that I was worth much more. I was to work most Saturdays and Sundays and often until 10 p.m. It was impossible to find adequate childcare during these hours. One evening I left Dianthus in charge of her two younger sisters. I arrived home that night about 10:30 p.m. after a long shift. I opened the door to find three faces greeting me.

“Don’t worry, Mom, everything is okay and the blood is all cleaned up,” they chimed. I steadied myself, took a deep breath and listened to the story of how Dianthus attempted to get her sisters to bed and when Rose resisted, pulling and pushing ensued, resulting in Rose falling against a sharp protrusion on the hot water heater. Apparently the fighting immediately ceased and the three banded together to clean up Rose’s head and the blood on the water heater and stairs. Rose and I left for the mediclinic before I got the whole story. We returned home about an hour later after Rose received a few stitches in her head. I am angry with myself and I think,

“How could I work for so little money—not even enough to live on let alone pay a babysitter—and risk my children’s physical safety?”

I share this story and my concerns with my financial social worker and she agreed it would be better to quit the job than to risk my children’s safety. I was only supposed to use the social assistance program for a year and it had almost been three. The idea of going back to work as a floral designer had not panned out, and I was at a loss for the direction my life would take at this point. When my financial social worker suggested I apply to attend university, I thought she was crazy. I barely made it through high school. I wasn’t able to graduate with my class because I was having trouble getting my assignments completed.

When dad tragically drowned six years earlier in 1973, mom lost the love of her life and was never the same. Mom was numb and lost for most of the first year and then she began dating and drinking. As a result, I, in essence, lost both my parents. My grandparents, in their grief, blamed my mother for the loss of their son, so they vanished from my life as well. While I was in grade twelve my mother was drinking heavily and not home much, her time being taken up with work and dating a man I despised. Being the oldest of four siblings, I was often left in charge, and at fourteen-years-old, I was not prepared for the responsibility.

Wow! Life is funny how it sometimes repeats. Here I am leaving Dianthus, thirteen-years-old, in charge of her sisters; however, I am not dating or drinking. I keep telling myself that I am not my mother, I am not my mother! I am much different than my mother, and I have access to resources she never had.

My financial social worker convinced me that it was a common practice to live off student loans as a way of getting off social assistance. So, I applied to the U of S. Although I was rejected due to my low high school marks, I believe that when life knocks you down, you brush yourself off and get back up. I applied as a mature student the second time, enlisting some editing help from my brother-in-law, and I was accepted! I chose Psychology because there were no papers required in the course (I had not written an essay in over twenty years) and multiple choice exams. The psychology class cost \$800.00; I found the money to pay for it while on social assistance by cutting back on groceries and new clothing, which was a challenge. I still remember being paralyzed with fear at the thought of walking onto the university campus. My social worker accompanied me the first time I entered Place Riel.

I passed my Psychology class with a 70, and I wrote the final exam in my professor's office early because it had been scheduled during the week-long division of property and custody

trial. The trial was to determine division of property and custody arrangements for our children. I decided that if I could pass a university class under such duress, maybe I had what it takes to get a university degree. Maybe my financial worker saw something in me that I had lost sight of years ago. When I decided the education route was for me, I recognized I did not want to be a teacher for a long term career. I wanted to be a counsellor, which meant five more years of school, I decided if I didn't realize that dream at least I could make a living as a teacher. So I started attending university, and we lived on student loans for the next five years. I attained a Bachelor of Education degree, graduating with honours, and was thrilled when I got my first position as a Casa (preschool) teacher in a Montessori school. I taught for a year and struggled to provide for our family of four on \$26,000 a year. I discovered that this was too little money to effectively raise three children. I recall my sister's words, "Sherrie you should be happy you have a university degree," But I was not happy I was still living in poverty, and tens of thousands of dollars in debt. Living on student loans along with all the government assistance in place for low-income families life was much easier financially, I will worry about paying back the student loans later. Initially my plan was to work as a teacher for five years before applying to the graduate program to become a counsellor but in light of the difficulty I experienced trying to support three children on \$26,000 a year, I decide to speed up the process. Today as I sit in the waiting room of the dentist office I await a phone call for an interview for acceptance into the graduate program.

At the dentist's office waiting for Rose, I sit anxiously waiting for a phone call from a professor from the university to interview me for the School and Counselling Psychology graduate program. I'm also wondering how we will survive. My cell phone rings.

This is it.

I move into the outer entrance to take the call. I tug open the door to the adjacent entrance to have more privacy. The entrance is enclosed in glass, which is important because I want Rose to be able to see me if she finishes her appointment before I am done my interview. Rose has always needed reassurance that I am nearby. The sun is beating in the window and warming me with its energy. I feel ready and confident to take this call.

I really need to be convincing. Anxiety fills my body.

“Hello” I answer, consciously steadying my voice. The voice on the other end of the phone is gentle and distinctly male. I feel ready to answer all questions clearly and passionately. The bench in the entrance is worn and hard on my butt. I notice the arms on the bench are wicker and worn. There is an artificial weeping fig in the corner of the entrance.

My mind drifts, Benjamina ficus, the Latin name for weeping fig. I guess I learned something from working in floral shops. Even if all those years as a floral designer won’t sustain me now, I did learn something.

I pull my mind back to the questions. I take a deep breath and focus on the voice on the phone.

“I would like to talk about parenting in poverty,” I say with conviction. I am surprised when the voice on the phone seems interested in my ideas for my thesis. Although I am totally engrossed in this critical conversation, intermittent moments emerge as I become aware of my environment and think of Rose. Once again, I look into the office through the glass walls and ensure that I am visible if she is looking for me.

The room is feeling warmer now, and I notice an uncomfortable feeling different than the anxiety that often manifests itself as a tightness in my stomach. I fidget as I experience the uncomfortable hardness of the wooden bench. I notice that the bench is smooth and slippery as I

move and shift my weight to find a more comfortable position. I continue to talk about how important my thesis may be to society because of the prevalence of children living in poverty (Williamson & Salkie, 2005). I know first-hand what it is like to live in poverty. I believe if I can sound convincing enough to satisfy the voice on the phone.

I need to get into this program! I have already given my notice at the school where I taught for a year. I asked them for a raise because I was finding surviving on \$26,000 was almost impossible, they denied me the raise. Getting into this program is the plan; in fact it is my only plan! Now here I sit on this hard bench desperately stating my case for acceptance.

The heavy glass door opens and a waft of the disinfectant air fills the entrance. I move closer to the fig tree against the wall to guard my privacy. I glance over my left shoulder to ensure I continue to be visible for Rose. I keep talking; it seems like such a long conversation, with many questions from the gentle male voice and passionate assertions from me.

I feel my guts wrenching as I desperately search for the words that I think will convince the voice on the phone to accept me into the grad program. The poverty statistics are vague and unclear (Spicker, 2002). At the heart of poverty is the issue of how children are affected (Hurtig, 1999; Levin, 2007). Since living life as a single parent I am very aware of how poverty affects the lives of children and the pain parents experience as a result. Also as a survivor of male partner violence I am glaringly aware of those dismal statistics. "Children who are exposed to violence in the home suffer from emotional trauma, have poor educational outcomes, and are at increased risk of using violence to solve problems" (Johnson, Statistics Canada, 2006, p. 8). Parents also suffer from society's judgement that our children are at risk because they live in poverty (Flores, 2004; Spicker, 2002). Situational poverty is due to a particular life changing event such as divorce or leaving an abusive relationship. Individuals in situational poverty often

have resources, an optimistic attitude, and difficulty accepting charity (Payne, 1996). I had family and friends in Saskatoon and I was willing to seek out helpful resources from mental health and domestic violence agencies. This was a frightening and lonely time in my life and I was often worried about our future. We regularly received food hampers from the church, which were a blessing because they eased the financial burden of purchasing groceries for a family of four. The church was very discreet phoning me to let me know when a food hamper was ready. However, I was never able to bring myself to go to the Saskatoon Food Bank for groceries or go to a soup kitchen for a meal.

Even though I feel desperate, I hope I don't sound it. I assess my tone of voice and the words I choose to state my position. I simply want to provide my children with a good, stable life.

I struggle for the perfect words to satisfy the voice on the phone.

I think I can do this! I can do this! I have to do this! I need to do this even if it means living on student loans to support my beautiful girls, and besides, I really do not want to be a teacher. I never really did. I do, however, have a renewed sense of respect for the profession. An education degree was a requirement to being accepted into the School and Counselling program and I decided it made sense because I could make some money working as a teacher for a few years. My dream is to be a certified counsellor. I really think I can be an effective counsellor. All the craziness in my life has to be useful in some way, doesn't it?

Here I sit in a glass cubicle fighting for my life. Maybe a bit dramatic, but really I want a better life for my daughters. This is a common wish for single mothers living in poverty (Mason, 2003). I want to be a positive role model for my children, showing them that no matter what happens, you never give up. I want them to know that they can always count on me to love and accept them as they are, worthy and loveable.

I become aware of a squeak as someone pushes the heavy door open to enter the dentist office. Once again the cool clean air fills my nostrils as I take a deep breath to prepare myself to answer the next question. I feel dampness on my neck and under my arms as I continue to convince the voice on the phone that I am a perfect candidate for the grad program. I imagine him smiling on the other end of the phone. I wonder what he looks like and if he is as nice as his voice implies.

I glance back for Rose and then resume my position facing the fig tree in the corner. I need to explain that I have what it takes to complete a graduate program. I had applied to this program before I took the teaching job at the Montessori school, and I had been declined due to lack of life experience.

No life experience? Me? I have facilitated parenting groups for the Adlerian Society and the Ministry of Social Services, after receiving training and certification; I lived through 17 years of an abusive marriage, while also working as a farmer's wife and floral designer and raised three daughters; I left an unhealthy marriage to start life over in a new city with three children, a broken-down car, and a suitcase of clothing; and I educated myself and received counselling and support for myself and my children from the effects of domestic violence and divorce. I taught school for a year, barely surviving financially and questioning this decision. I applied to the program for the second time and here I sit, in a hot glass enclosure, answering questions from the voice on the phone, trusting that I will be able to convince this important voice that I am capable of enduring the rigor of a graduate program.

I fold up my phone. I assess if I was able to provide the critical evidence to be deemed worthy to enter this program. I stand up, stretch, and feel the ache in my upper and lower body. I push open the heavy glass door. I feel refreshed as the cool air from the office washes over my

sweaty body. I had not noticed until this moment how wet I had become. Sweat dripping down my neck, I can feel dampness over my chest and back. I breathe in the cool air filled with the antiseptic aroma and recite the serenity prayer.

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference. *I feel a sense of calm as I recite these words in my mind, and I feel the tension in my stomach release.* I did what I could do; now the rest is up to you, God, *I pray silently. Is this to be my path? Will I receive an acceptance letter?*

My heart fills with joy as Rose enters the waiting area with a big smile on her face. She proudly holds up her new toothbrush, dental floss, and bubble gum flavoured Trident gum.

Que Sera Sera (Whatever Will Be, Will Be). My paternal grandfather would often sing this to me as a child. *Humming this melody fills me with hope as I hold out my hand to Rose and we walk together to the car.*

Later that day, Wednesday June 20, 2007, I write in my gratitude journal.

I received an acceptance letter in the mail today. I am grateful for being accepted into the grad program Educational Psychology and School Counselling. It is a bit frightening and a lot exciting.

* * *

According to Statistics Canada, in “2003, families headed by female lone-parent under age 65 had an average income of 32, 500” (2006, p. 136). Lindsay & Almey (2006) also noted “38% of all families headed by lone-parent mothers had incomes which fell below the after-tax Low Income Cut-offs” (p. 146). Taking the time to heal from the effects of the trauma impacted my ability to earn money.

Measuring Violence Against Women (Johnson, 2006, Statistics Canada) estimates that intimate partner violence costs Canadian tax payers between \$1.5 and \$15 billion per year due to costs associated with health, criminal justice, social services, and lost productivity. According to the *2008 Transition Home Survey*, 3,222 women across Canada stayed in shelters, often with their children, to escape an abusive situation. We lived at Adelle house from November 1998 to June 2000, a second-stage safe house for women and their families. On a snapshot day, April 16, 2008, approximately 2,550 children stayed in shelters across Canada with their mothers (Johnson, 2006, p. 12). If the snapshot day were April 16, 1999, my three girls and I would have been included in those statistics.

Statistics alone can't adequately describe male partner violence or the sociocultural representations documented in news headlines, such as “‘Woman Knifed by Estranged Husband.’ ‘Lovers’ Spat Ends Tragically.’ ‘Ex-Boyfriend Shoots Mom, Kids.’ We shudder, then quickly turn our attention elsewhere” (Weiss, 2004, p. 5) convincing ourselves that these horrific events have nothing to do with our lives. The reality is male partner violence doesn't happen out there in some incomprehensible place. “It happens in our town, in our neighborhood, on our street. . . . Women who have experienced domestic abuse look just like everyone else. They look just like me” (Weiss, 2004, p. 6). And they look like me!

Cultural threads

Determined to understand how we are influenced by culture, I discover Morgan (2000), who explained how “the ways in which we understand our lives are influenced by the broader stories of the culture in which we live” (p. 9). I agree that we are influenced by our environment. Morgan (2009) differentiated that “some of the stories we have about our lives will have positive effects and some will have negative effects on life in the past, present and future” (p. 9).

Although this is true, what I find encouraging is that we can change our stories. Morgan clarified that “the meanings that we give to these events occurring in a sequence across time do not occur in a vacuum. There is always a context in which the stories of our lives are formed” (2000, p. 9). I often wonder if other women struggle with some of the same things I did, such as Reginald’s fascination with pornography. Would it be acceptable if I knew how many other women willingly accepted pornography into their intimate relationships? Morgan further elucidated how understanding “this context contributes to the interpretations and meanings that we give to events. The context of gender, class, race, culture and sexual preference are powerful contributors to the plot of the stories by which we live” (2000, p. 9).

My story takes place in a small urban setting and rural farm culture. I somehow understood that one of my roles as a woman was to keep my husband happy. Where it all gets fuzzy, why does this equate to going along with Reginald’s desires when they contradict my personal preference, morals, and discomfort? Although it is important to accept the story in context of its time, place, and impact, it is also valuable for me to question the story from a current standpoint in order to gain deeper insight and self-understanding. By analyzing my feelings, thoughts, and behaviours 15 years later I start with a fresh point of view where I am able to address the societal pressures I faced during my marriage to Reginald. It’s tricky to look at decisions I made at that time in my life because I felt so much pressure; from my family’s and my in-laws expectations of me, my desired life-style, neighbours thoughts and beliefs, and my dream of being a happy family which included a mom, a dad, and four children.

Although Reginald never punched me with a fist, I experienced physical abuse as illustrated in the court transcript. Not until preparation for trial did I reveal that he physically kicked me out of bed, I was embarrassed and ashamed to admit that my partner literally

propelled me out of our bed. I would attempt to verbalize my feelings regarding my discomfort with circumstances in my life with Reginald, “I feel uncomfortable with Reginald’s obsession with pornography.” I would hear, “Well just tell him you don’t like it” or “If you are so unhappy, why don’t you leave him?” I found it easier to just avoid the subject or lie and say, “Oh everything is going great right now.” Platt et al. (2009) stated how a valid rationale for “why victims are prone to denial and minimization is that domestic violence is one of the most devastating forms of betrayal a person can experience” (p. 191). An intimate cohabitation relationship is supposed to be safe and nurturing, so when violence occurs within this liaison, “victims may find their basic needs for solace, refuge, protection, and respect cannot be met. Furthermore, this intimate violence may undermine the victims’ worldview, and with it, their moorings in reality” (Platt et al., 2009, p. 191). Once a woman has experienced this incomprehensible existence with “acts of violence by intimate partners, [often she will] question what can truly be trusted” (Platt et al., 2009, p. 191).

My worldview was tipped upside down with all the violence I endured with Reginald. I couldn’t figure out what I had done to deserve this outrageous treatment. Asking the woman why she doesn’t leave “overlooks the staggering energy and resilience required simply to endure and acknowledge an abusive situation” (Platt, Barton, & Freyd, 2009, p.196). It was indeed tough to admit that my marriage was abusive because I kept telling myself, ‘he’s just stressed about money right now, or it’s a tough year for farming, or he had a rough childhood and he needs me to be there for him.’ Naparstek (2004) articulated why women often feel guilty. She asserted that “it was her husband’s strategy to chip away incrementally at her autonomy and pride, and to brainwash her over time to think that everything was her fault” (p. 116).

I would justify my acceptance of each perplexing episode by saying to myself, ‘When you love someone sometimes you have to do things you don’t agree with.’ Over time, I came to accept that I was the guilty one, and Reginald was the injured party, because that is what I had been repeatedly told (Naparstek, 2004). In this way, I became responsible for his every outburst. It took years to stop feeling responsible and guilty for everything. Saying “I’m sorry” is a hard habit to break. Naparstek (2004) conveyed that this was characteristic behaviour of a woman who suffered trauma and even though intellectually she knew better, “feeling guilty and responsible for her own pain became as familiar as the air she breathed” (p. 116). This quote speaks to the contradicting feelings I often experienced during traumatic violent episodes. I grew up seeing my parents love and respect each other, and I believed a husband should protect, honour, and respect his wife. I felt neglected, scorned, and disrespected. Disillusioned, I kept thinking, ‘this isn’t really happening; this isn’t how it is supposed to be’. Yet, I was reluctant to just walk away from my commitment and my dream. I guess I wanted to be able to look at myself in the mirror and know deep down that I gave my marriage my best effort. Even when I had come to terms that my leaving and moving on was the best decision for my children and me, the aftermath involved continued coercion and torment.

* * *

With societal supports such as domestic violence groups, I had the courage to stay away. I held on to each word Reginald uttered because I wanted to believe we could remain a family. The education and awareness I gained in the groups exposed his assurances as empty promises. In the groups I learned from the experience and wisdom of other women who trusted their intimate partner’s insincere sentiments. I have come to understand that a safe, comfortable, and

peaceful life can't endure on hollow vows. I was willing to learn from the collective knowledge of these phenomenal women that I too could provide a future free from violence for my family.

I believe in the power of women and I celebrate the courage women show when they share their stories. Miller and Taylor (2003) proposed:

Women often write stories as a way to break free from their constraints, although their writing will remain marginalized by critics if evaluated according to the individualistic paradigm of the self. . . . The woman's autobiographical self is seen contextually [then] her story will reveal the significance of interpersonal relationships and community identification (p. 19).

There is a risk in sharing our stories and secrets because we become open to stigmatization. Poulos (2009) noted how often we maintain cultural norms in order not to be "seen as a *defective* other" (p. 41). My hope is to challenge false and unjust sociocultural stigmas associated with women who experience male partner violence; by communicating my personal account knowing that in doing so I risk being perceived as impaired. I am not spoilt or damaged, and I am not responsible for the offenses I was subject to throughout my marriage. I share a story of experiencing stigma.

* * *

Psychology was my first university class. I sat beside a young woman for about a week, and one day we began to chat. A few days later I offered her a ride home, as we happened to live in the same area of the city. During the ride, we began chatting and sharing personal aspects of our lives.

"My mom is a social worker," she informs me.

"I moved to the city because I left my abusive husband," I reveal.

The next day she sat in a new seat far away from her regular spot beside me. Feeling confused, I approach her.

“Is something wrong? I noticed you didn’t sit in your regular seat today,” I inquire.

“My mom warned me that it was better if I had nothing more to do with you,” she replied in a matter of fact tone.

Wow . . . ouch! I couldn’t help but wonder what her mother had told her about “women like me”.

* * *

Because I was shunned when I revealed my story, I can understand why domestic violence against women is considered a ‘silent’ issue. Chatzifotiou (2008) reported that this “silence contributes to and prevents women from acknowledging the real ‘size’ of the problem” (p. 114). Women who have experienced domestic violence are often relieved when they learn that they are not the only ones who have been abused by their intimate partner. Women frequently acknowledge that sharing their stories and listening to other women’s stories are vital to their healing. Through facilitating groups, I have found that much wisdom is gained through this process of sharing.

Lenore Walker’s research (1979) supports this idea that survivors of male partner violence benefit from listening to the stories of other women with similar experiences. Specifically, Walker concluded that we can achieve a deeper understanding of male partner violence by listening to women talk about “what happens to a battered woman, how she is victimized, and how we can help society change so this horrible crime can no longer be perpetrated upon women” (1979, p. xiii). I agree with and find solace in Bancroft’s (2002) perspective that it is possible to change a culture that passively accepts violence and oppression.

He contested, “Once we tear the cover of excuses, distortions, and manipulations off of abusers, they suddenly find abuse much harder to get away with,” (pp. 388-399) and by taking this stand of accountability, we can change the status quo on male partner violence.

In our current society, a woman who survives male partner violence is often silenced, thus losing her figurative voice. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) discovered how:

The word ‘voice’ is used as a metaphor for various aspects of women’s experience and development. . . . Women whom they had interviewed used various words and phrases similar to ‘voice’ and ‘silence’ to describe their lives, such as; speaking up, speaking out, being silenced, not being heard, really listening, really talking, words as weapons, feeling deaf and dumb, having no words, saying what you mean, [and] listening to be heard. . . . They concluded that survivors of male partner violence use these phrases to describe their sense of mind, self-worth, and feelings of isolation from or connection to others. (p. 18)

I see how silencing and isolating others who have problems are a way of avoiding dealing with harsh realities our society does not wish to address.

* * *

I am damned if I do keep the silence, and damned if I don’t keep wading into uncomfortable territory to scrutinize my memories and examine male partner violence.

* * *

Dalton and Schneider (2001) hypothesized that although many sources blame society alone for the existence of male violence:

Abusiveness can’t be explained away by socialization [alone, because other men] socialized in the same culture as abusive men, remain nonabusive. Socialization [has] to be combined with psychological influences that precede it developmentally It is only after the personality originates that culture exerts influence—exerts it unevenly on secure and insecure boys. (pp. 91-92)

Yllö (1994) offered a sociocultural solution. She asserted, “The very definition of masculinity requires reformulation so that men’s self-worth is not based on their domination of others and, further, so that violence is not positively regarded as the ultimate expression of manhood” (Yllö, 1994, p. 315). I agree that socialization is only one aspect influencing an abuser; however, it is a powerful influence not to be disregarded.

* * *

In my current work as a contract facilitator, I hear stories of strength and courage from women. The first time I had the opportunity to listen to personal stories of women in a group, I realized that the telling and hearing of stories is a valuable process. Stories aid in healing and moving on and are an instrument for interconnection and enlightenment between women. I have come to believe through the sharing of my story and offering more helpful insights, professionals may better understand women who have experienced male partner violence. I have met many women and each woman has her own unique story. All of the women I work with leave an impression on my heart while others leave an imprint on my soul. One such woman, made the choice to start her life over after forty-years of marriage. I continue to marvel at her faith, gentle nature, and inquisitiveness in an attempt to understand male partner violence. Her determination to find peace, forgiveness, and a life free from violence inspired me. On our last day together she gave me a hand written card.

Sherrie,

Thank-you so very much for all your guidance through my journey.

You are truly an inspiration.

This memory serves as a reminder that women have the opportunity to inspire each other through sharing our stories.

One of the domestic violence groups I facilitated we created a fan during our last session together. Before the start of the group, I fold coloured paper to create a fan. Each woman picks a coloured fan and then we each print our name on our own fan, and then we pass it around to each member of the group to write on. Each woman in the group shares one thing that she appreciates about the woman whose name is on the fan and one wish she has for her future. Over the course of years facilitating this group, I have accumulated many fans. Some of the comments individual women have shared with me are a source of inspiration and encouragement. I take this opportunity to share some with you:

-Sherrie I admire your skill and love. I hope you know how important you are to everyone around you.

-I admire your patience and understanding manner. I wish for you to continue to have a healthy, happy relationship with your children and spouse.

-I admire your sincerity in sharing your personal stories. I hope you will continue to inspire others in your life's journey.

- I admire your courage to move on to a new relationship that is so wonderful for you. I hope that you continue to have a loving relationship with your daughters.

-I admire you Sherrie that you went back to school to have a career.

-I admire your love and support for others, your ability to connect with people and give them hope. I hope that you understand your importance in people's lives and that you are changing the world for the better.

-I admire that you turned your painful experience into something meaningful and purposeful. You got to help me, help myself!

-Your story is legendary to me. It's amazing how much a woman can achieve once she decides to take good care of herself.

I believe as a woman who has endured, survived, and transformed as a result of male partner violence that my story could prove a practical tool to counsellors in collaboratively providing insightful, empathic, and advantageous counselling to women. As a child I would

share my findings and discoveries with others. As an adult I continue to value the importance of sharing my experience, knowledge, and growth with others. Life has provided me the unique opportunity to explore how my experiences will inform my theoretical and professional knowledge of male partner violence and I wonder how this research might contribute to the professional development of counsellors. Experiencing male partner violence has forever changed me; I accept the challenge to enlighten others with love and compassion.

Women are a source of inspiration for other women but have also historically contributed to the oppression of women. The many ways of being a woman are found in the media, magazines, movies, television sit-coms, beauty salons, and by listening to our grandmothers and mother's influence, and unfortunately by women judging other women (Morgan, 2000). Turning it all around begins with encouraging each other as women to be all we are meant to be. The healing begins by listening to women's stories. Davis (2002) addressed the significance of this by articulating how when women are able to use "their own words, abused women bring consciousness to domestic violence," revealing the sociocultural epidemic it has become (p. 1261). Davis further reasoned that "until women can acceptably use their voices to tell what they know about abuser behaviors, we will continue to find reasons why abused women are using faulty judgment in choosing partners" (2002, p. 1261). Women don't choose abusive partners. I had been married for six years before I saw the real abusive side of Reginald. I have found so much comfort, healing, and validation from attending psychoeducational groups for women. I agree wholeheartedly that listening supports women's experience of male partner violence by providing them the freedom to envision a healthy future with permission to grieve and rebuild from the trauma (Davis, 2002). Learning about other women's experience of male partner violence is not only part of healing, it is also inspiring.

Inspiration

Meeting Sophie Tamas, the author of *Life after leaving: The remains of spousal abuse*, was very meaningful to me, for this reason. She has personally experienced male partner violence and wrote her dissertation about her journey. It appears that in present-day society, discussing male partner violence is more socially acceptable. There are an abundance of studies, journal articles, and books written about other poor women who have been conned and beaten into submission. However, research based on personal experience is rare.

“Hi, I wanted to meet you. My name is Sophie Tamas.” As I am wrapping up my print a woman approaches me and introduces herself.

“Oh my, Sophie, I wanted to meet you. I saw you were going to be at the conference. I read your book,” I blurt out awkwardly.

She invites me to meet for coffee to talk more about our similar work. We agree to meet later because she is on her way to another presentation.

It’s like a dream. I am in a dream. This is not a dream. I am lost in my thoughts as I collect myself and my silkscreen, when Sophie approaches me again. “I really want to talk with you so I am not going to the next presentation. Let’s meet now for coffee if it’s a good time for you.”

“Yes, that would be wonderful,” I stammer.

We walk down the grand staircase of the union building together to the coffee shop on the main floor of the building and start chatting like old friends. I wanted to meet her, to talk to her, and now here I am actually having a conversation with Sophie Tamas. I have so many questions. I’m following her around in a daze, star struck, and in absolute disbelief that I am about to sit down and have coffee with a woman whose literary works have inspired me. Like me, she

survived the trauma of male partner violence. I feel honoured that she is interested in my work. She offers to buy me a coffee. As we look for a spot to sit and chat I become aware of this grand space filled with Georgian revival-style architecture built in 1939-1940. Many people are milling about and sitting at tables eating and visiting. I wonder if anyone notices how alert and alive I feel in this moment. I honestly think I can feel the blood flowing in my veins! Me, in an amazing building, filled with spectacular hand-carved woodwork, in a bustling historic university cafeteria lounge. I am about to share conversation and a coffee with playwright, Sophie Tamas! She spots Shawn who has joined her this year, for the first time, at the conference; we sit together at a table. As we talk I discover that he is her current partner and has been a huge support to her throughout her divorce.

“I don’t know how I would have managed without him,” Sophie shares. “He is so good with my three daughters,” she touches his thigh gently and smiles lovingly at him.

“I have three daughters too,” I blurt out. “I feel blessed.”

“Yes,” Sophie responds softly. Our eyes meet, and we share a moment of mommy pride. Time flies by! Sophie pulls out a pile of papers from her bag. She is anxious and excited about her new idea. “I think it would be great to have women create a scrapbook page of their experience.” I scan the multiple sheets filled almost overflowing with pictures, images, words, textures, and colours. I want to study each page thoroughly, but I am aware that we are short on time.

“They look great,” I say, “lots to take in, to process. I am not much of a scapbooker,” I add. I think Sophie looks disappointed as she gathers up her pages and stuffs them back into her bag. I want to look at them more closely to give them the attention they deserve so that I can give Sophie the respect she deserves. Still overwhelmed by my meeting with Sophie I can’t help but

think I am ruining this. I fear she will be sorry she met with me. I look down and feel tension forming in my tummy. We both become aware of the time; an hour has passed. Sophie stands up, reaching out her hand, "I have enjoyed meeting you, Sherrie, and I am hoping we can stay connected through e-mail." Shawn stands up and shakes my hand as well, "Yes, Sherrie, it has been so nice to meet you." Sophie hands me a small piece of torn paper with her e-mail address scribbled on it. Shawn and Sophie rush out to prepare for her presentation, Plenary: Research and/as therapy: Revisited. This plenary session also includes established researchers and writers Laurel Richardson, Carolyn Ellis, Liz Bondi, Jane Speedy, and Jonathan Wyatt. I want desperately to be at this presentation so I pull myself together and look for the room.

When I find the room I sit at the front by myself. I take in a huge deep cleansing breath and become aware that I am in the presence of masters. These people are the "rock stars" of qualitative research. These are my kind of people. I love this place. Each presenter stands up and reads excerpts from their latest work. They stand up one by one and read so humbly and yet so passionately. I think this is so much more powerful than PowerPoint because I am drawn into their presentations; it is up close and personal.

Laurel Richardson slowly stands and makes her way to the centre of the stage. I notice she is wearing the same big fabric flower she wore the day before when she presented a workshop.

What does a big, floppy, oversized, flower say about the woman? I think about Loretta LaRoche, a humour therapist who advised women to celebrate who they are, to live life with panache. She said, "We see the world we describe," so how we see the world depends on the language we use; so when you walk into a room, announce: "Ta Da! I am here." Maybe this is

what Laurel's flower represents, her pizzazz and flare for life. I am intrigued by Laurel. She is tall, medium frame, with broad shoulders, and her clothing is simple, long, loose, and flowing.

She is deliberate in her speech and shares her story of how she acquired a traumatic brain injury in a car accident, an injury from which she is still recovering. She wrote a story about her experiences in rehabilitation, called A Kiss in the dark. She shares how she developed the characters based on real people. It is obvious to me that this woman, who was a mathematician before her brain injury, is brilliant and has a real love and passion for life. Laurel speaks about the therapeutic nature of words and writing. She has a commanding presence, and I am in awe of her gentle manner and her genuine desire to share her wisdom and skills with other writers. In this way, she is a kindred spirit because ever since I was a young child I would share my passions and new discoveries with all.

She speaks of her latest work with love and a kind of playful curiosity. "It began as five easy pieces, but kind of evolved into 'Twelve Uneasy Pieces'. I have been up all night writing." She seems pleased with herself. "I love to write and to blur genres. I write for an emotional need, not for therapy. If one does what one loves it is therapeutic."

She adds, "The act of writing for the love of writing is in itself therapeutic."

Laurel begins explaining her twelve uneasy pieces. "It is a metaphor, using a desk with eleven drawers. As I open each drawer I explore what is inside of each drawer. For instance one drawer is filled with Feminism, another graduate school, my various degrees, post modernism, and so on. I haven't decided what will be in each drawer yet; it is a work in process. When I open a drawer, I begin to unravel its significance in my life."

She stops and announces, "I am really quite excited about it. It is unusual for me to write things at the last minute like this, as ordinarily I am very organized and prepared. It just kind of

came to me and I went with it.” While Laurel hands out a sheet of paper she announces, “I began my career as a mathematician; I started pondering the connotation of the number twelve. First it is a sublime number, and there are only two known sublime numbers. I began by making a list of the many things where the number twelve has significance. This search resulted in two sets of twelves.”

I am mesmerized by Laurel’s obvious passion for this discovery. One of the 24 items on her two sets of twelve is, “the age at which I published my first book.” I am in the presence of awesomeness in the form of this woman. She graciously returns to her seat after a round of applause.

The next presenter is Carolyn Ellis, another rock star. Her presentation is called “Down the Rabbit Hole: Autoethnographic Life Review”. Carolyn explains, “The story begins by inviting the reader to come for a walk while listening to four individual stories. The first story is about a dog killing a rabbit, rather gruesome; the second story is about finding out that my good friend, “Bud” Goodall had stage four, pancreatic cancer; the third story describes a lightning strike, an intriguing story; and the fourth story is a tragic tale of a dear friend dying in a hospice of kidney failure.”

Carolyn clarifies that “each of these stories is about loss in the context of the trials and tribulations of living. Writing about loss became therapeutic for me. Losing a friend is worthy of intense pain and not something to shy away from. My writing became synergistic with the living of life.” I am in the presence of a master of her craft. As I listen to Carolyn speak, I am filled with awe and surprise. I have had the opportunity while doing my research to read some of her work. She is brilliant, to say the least, and instrumental in autoethnography being taken seriously in the academic world. It is unmistakable, she speaks with a lisp. I am surprised. Then I

listen to her read, “Come, and follow me as we walk down the winding path. . . ” Her words are so eloquent. The way she wields words leave me breathless. Carolyn sits down after a vigorous round of applause.

Liz Bondi is next up to present. Her presentation is called “Recovering”. “This is regarding writing about meaning making when I couldn’t find meaning,” Liz begins. She describes that in her research, “there is an arch of emotion from despair to elation.”

As I sit and listen to this small-framed woman who speaks with a clearly foreign English accent, I am still. I have discovered that when I am listening to someone who speaks differently from me, I listen closer, more intently.

“Paradoxically I have both recovered and not recovered,” Liz announces. In her research as Liz continues her story of recovery she declares that she has made a revelation. As we “recover and cover over the story” we continue our recovery. I am not sure I understand completely although I believe she is alluding to the fact that in conducting research one may find many layers of finding meaning making.

As the audience applauds for Liz, Jane Speedy stands up and walks up three stairs to the top of the stage and speaks from the podium. I note that she is the only speaker to do this. Her presentation is more formal, speech-like. Her attire is more formal as well, skirt and jacket; very professional. Jane also speaks with an English accent; however, it is not as pronounced as Liz’s and is easier for me to understand without straining. Jane’s presentation is called “To Be Confirmed”. I catch bits and pieces of her talk, things like, “transform herself through the research process”; “helps them feel connected to readers”; “heuristic and autoethnographer”; and finally, “there is no wrong right way.” As the preceding quotes from her speech imply, I am

left confused. There is so much to learn about this form of research I decide. She is finished, the audience applauds, and she steps down the stairs and back to her chair.

I am excited because it is now time for Sophie's presentation. She is co-presenting with Jonathan Wyatt. They position two chairs at the front and, in a very relaxed and natural manner, share a scripted conversation about their personal experiences of writing being therapeutic. Their presentation is called "Intimate (dis)connections: Research, Therapy, and 'Real' Life". I realize it is a script, and yet it seems so natural so unrehearsed. Once again, I am in awe of Sophie. At the end of her presentation, Sophie is emotional, crying and wondering if this work she loves will translate into employment. I feel my heart ache as she speaks with such intense emotion.

"I know it matters, and then I doubt it at the same time with the same intensity," Sophie rationalizes her struggle with trusting the process. Will Sophie's autoethnographic work make a difference, perhaps not? I respect and admire Sophie and her brave work.

*I want to go to her and tell her how touched I was by her words, and yet I resist for fear of scaring her. After all, she is Sophie Tamas, a playwright and author. I don't want her to think I am too clingy! I approach Laurel Richardson and comment on her presentation and of course her flower. I did also muster up the courage to ask Carolyn Ellis to autograph my newly purchased copy of her book, *The ethnographic I*. She signed it as follows:*

For Sherrie,

My best to you in your work and life.

Regard, Carolyn.

It is such a thrill to have her signature in my copy of her book. This may sound a bit corny, but getting her signature reminded me of the excitement I felt as a 10-year-old when I got Tommy Hunter's signature. It was refreshing to attend a conference that celebrated both men and

women's power. At this conference I saw both men and women openly weep and speak with authority. It was liberating. If these people represent the open-minded direction our society is heading I am not only thrilled but inspired.

* * *

The first step to changing society's attitudes begins by learning to understand, appreciate, and support one another. Women judge other women by accepting the societal construction of beauty seen in social media and advertising (Morgan, 2000). When a woman refers to another woman as a "bitch" when she asserts herself, or criticising another woman's physical appearance by saying, "what kind of a man would want someone who looks like that?" I believe the first step is to change this unhealthy and oppressive practice. The next step is to seek connections. Kerney provided the vibrant colourful water colour images on "How to Build Community" poster which displays recommendations from Syracuse cultural workers describing how to become part of one's community. One phrase I find particularly striking is, "Know that no one is silent—though many are not heard" (Kerney, 1998). Through the process of healing, moving on while creating a new version of myself, and researching and writing this thesis, I feel more positive about myself as a woman, mother, and, more significantly, a survivor of male partner violence. Admittedly, the process of self-reflection and research is painful. I believe the road to catharsis and healing involves trudging down the painful memories to emerge on the other side. The painful memories will always be a part of who I am and I will be forever changed by the experience, but I continue to be a whole and complete woman and mother.

* * *

Kendrick (1998) revealed how often women who had already experienced victimization through patriarchy or who struggled with their own psychological issues are disregarded as is the

complexity and diversity of individual women's experiences. Davis (2002) discovered "listening provides a vehicle for catharsis, [while it] validates women's experiences, allowing them to build even stronger inner resources . . . when women's voices are heard collectively, [and only when we listen] to personal insights is there a possibility for societal transformation to begin" (p. 1261). Davis insisted that the power of a solitary voice had the ability to significantly affect research on male partner violence. This reminds me of Pelias (2012) when he spoke of creating a ripple; a single voice can create that ripple.

The shrapnel of intimate partner violence has financial and social repercussions that ripple across generations. I left with my three daughters in order to stop the destructive influence of violence in our lives and as a result lived in poverty for many years. I also taught my daughters that their self-worth and safety is more valuable than all the riches in the world. I have come to comprehend how I couldn't have foreseen the violence my pregnancy would unleash. I have learned to understand and identify what kept me in the abusive relationship for so many years. I recognize and acknowledge what a vital role societal supports and intimate partner violence education played in my ability to permanently stay away. Drawing from the wisdom, courage, and strength of women and men has provided me the inspiration to persevere in the face of adversity and poverty. I continue to grow stronger and more confident in my ability to effectively single parent. I accept the sacrifice and burden that comes with dealing with continued abuse after leaving while learning to navigate the court system.

Each woman must choose her own path. Radford and Hester (2006) explained that a woman's sense of responsibility for her children's wellbeing often "plays a major part in [her] decisions to stay or leave an abusive partner" (p. 44). This was certainly true for me. The thought of losing custody of Dianthus, Rose, and Buttercup was unbearable. This real possibility was the

stimulus that gave me the energy to move out on my own and raise three children alone. I truly believe that it was better for them to be with me even if we had to struggle financially. Radford and Hester found that women are often conflicted about whether staying or leaving is in the child's best interest. Commonly a woman would feel conflicted with "pressures from children to go home, coupled with feeling unable to cope alone" (Radford and Hester, 2006, p. 45). These dynamics added to my feelings of failure and made my decision to leave or return to an abusive relationship a truly difficult choice.

CHAPTER 4: Stay or Leave? Shrapnel of the Heart



Figure 6: “*Blessings*”. 2002.

Lithography. 13 ½ x 19 (34.29 x 48.26). Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.

I am truly grateful for the privilege of having these three young women in my life. Every time I look at this print of the girls, I smile. I remember the joy filled procedure of capturing the initial photographic image. Dianthus, Rose and Buttercup lie down on the sidewalk, heads intermingled, waiting impatiently so I could take a picture of them for my University Photography class. We all giggle as I fumble with the focus on my manual camera and the girls chime together, “Oh mom, come on take the picture already.” Developing the picture also brings me great joy when the beautiful image of my precious girls appears. Creating this reproduction of the photograph of the girls proves to be challenging. Accurate proportions and true to life physical aspects become altered in the production of this print. Even so when I gaze upon this

print I know I am so blessed. *Dear God I thank-you for your grace giving me the strength to seek a better life.*

* * *

This chapter represents the heart of my thesis and reveals the most shame-filled period of my life. Muncey (2010) conveyed how academic work tends to emphasize triumphant stories; “and shies away from those with mistakes or of which we are ashamed” (p. xi). Adler (1870-1937) believed there is value in making mistakes. I believe that mistakes are opportunities to learn and grow (Nelson & Lott, 2012). I chose to include this chapter because my children are central to my internal conflict and dilemma of family. Do I choose to stay and leave our family intact? Do I leave and face societal scrutiny and stigma in the courtroom? Statistics Canada (2006) reported that “children who are exposed to violence in the home suffer from emotional trauma, have poor educational outcomes, and are at increased risk of using violence to solve problems” (Johnson, p. 8).

Domestic violence indeed causes harm to the children (Carter, 2006). It is probable that “staying in a violent relationship may harm children more than divorce” (Carter, 2006, p. 12). Parenting is the toughest job one will ever have and the idea of living alone to raise three children is terrifying. Parenting involves dealing with shame, vulnerability and judgement as we face our own personal indecisiveness and lack of confidence regarding how best to parent our children (Brown, 2012). The idea of starting over and starting over alone, often with children, is daunting at the very least even when male partner violence has not been a factor.

Courtroom Crusade

I boldly designed this chapter to be arduous for the reader as I include a significant number of excerpts from the court transcripts. I aspire to illuminate my responsibility, burden,

and agony of going through a month long Custody and Access assessment in preparation for the determination of custody of Dianthus, Rose, and Buttercup before trial in the Court of Queen's Bench. My intent is to provoke you so that you may empathize with a woman and mother who lived with male partner violence and what 'just leave' encompasses. Throughout this chapter I weave the transcript from the trial for the matter of division of property and custody and access "In The Court of Queen's Bench for Saskatchewan" (2001) and knit together the sociocultural, sociopolitical, and judicial reality of trial, the literature regarding best interests of the children, and the poignant reality of trial from my personal experience. For ethical reasons all names used in the court transcripts are pseudonyms other than my own. Also to protect the identity of Reginald I cannot reference the transcript in the official style with actual surnames so I transpose Q. B. Div. No. 711 in their place.

* * *

In the final meeting before our week long trial on Sunday afternoon April 22nd, 2001, I meet with Gerald Walsh to discuss our division of property and custody trial commencing at 9 a.m. Monday morning.

"Now, Sherrie, you hired me as your legal representation in court, but I am also bound to provide you with sound legal advice." Gerald Walsh informs me.

"Yes, I understand that." I reply somewhat puzzled. 'What is he trying to say', I wonder?

"Well, the truth is Sherrie; I really believe we have a very slim chance of winning supervised visitation for Reginald in court. We simply don't have enough evidence that he is a danger to the girls. A full week trial will cost you tens of thousands of dollars. I don't want to waste your money. The division of property should only take two days, so that would save you three days of court costs." Gerald Walsh submits.

As he speaks, my inner voice screams, ‘Doesn’t he get it?’ What don’t I get? Being forced to leave my marriage to keep my children safe from their father isn’t enough? What does the court want from me? If he isn’t a threat to the girls, why did I have to leave? What does society need to prove that Reginald is a danger to their mental, emotional, psychological, and physical well-being? But what I calmly say is, “I appreciate your advice Gerald, but I hired you because I believe you have the ability to win this case. I want you to fight for supervised access.” As I listen to myself speak I am pleasantly surprised at my determination.

“Well. Okay Sherrie, I will do my best to represent your concerns in the courtroom but I want you to be prepared if you don’t get what you want.” Gerald warns as he stands up signalling that our time together is over.

As I stand up, I explain, “I recognize that Reginald is an important part of the girl’s life but I will do all I can to keep them safe and I need you to help me.”

“I will do my best, Sherrie; see you tomorrow in the courtroom.” Gerald responds.

As I walk out the door I say, “See you tomorrow Gerald.” I am terrified and shaking as I push the elevator button. ‘I hope I am doing the right thing but I have no way of knowing how this is all going to play out in the courtroom. I will tell the truth and trust my intuition that this is the right thing to do’ I think to myself as the door slides open.

“You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32) (GNB, p.1570)

** * **

Our trial took place in 2001; I look to Bancroft, Silverman, and Ritchie (2012) as they discuss the implications of unsupervised visitation in domestic violence situations. My past experience of Reginald’s malice led to my resolve for supervised visitation between Reginald

and the girls. My thoughts return to the courtroom as I recall Reginald's lawyer questioning him regarding how he kicked Dianthus.

Q- Mervin Kemp —There was a concern raised about kicking Dianthus, doing chores. And according to Sherrie, this happened on at least two or three occasions?

A- Reginald—I can clearly only remember one. But yes, I did that. I did not kick her straight out, but I kicked her on the side of her leg.

Q- And this is in how many years of doing chores together?

A- Ten. (Q. B. Div. No. 711, 503, 2001)

I let out a huge sigh as I ponder, 'Just what is the acceptable quota for kicking your child?' The visual image of footprints on my daughters' legs is seared on my heart. I privately question, 'Does it make a difference if he didn't kick her wholeheartedly?' The force of Reginald's half-hearted kick left a boot imprint on Dianthus' thigh and a more ominous imprint on her soul. One of the most difficult endeavours of redefining myself was taking responsibility for my actions. I think about how Reginald is not prepared to own up to the injury he inflicted and I wonder, 'Is it wrong of me to want our children to be treated with respect?' As parents it is our responsibility to protect our children from harm. It is not our right to hurt them. Children are a gift from God. I vow to protect my children under any circumstances and never again to be a bystander when I see them being hurt.

I remember this day...

"Mom, I hate doing chores. Please don't make me go out there anymore," Dianthus announces through her tears as she walks into the house.

"What happened?"

"Dad is mad at me; I can never do what he wants fast enough." Dianthus continues talking as she sheds the many layers of winter clothing necessary to keep warm while doing chores in the 40 below weather.

“I’ll talk to him. He just has so much work to do, he gets frustrated sometimes.”

“Mom, he kicked me,” says Dianthus as she pulls down her pants to show me the large boot-shaped bruise on her thigh.

I feel nauseous; my head is spinning. How can he kick his own child? “Oh my dear,” I choke out despite the large lump in my throat. As I embrace her I whisper, “I love you. You don’t deserve to be kicked my dear. No one does. I’ll talk to him tonight.” Tears fill my eyes.

My heart hurts. A mother is supposed to protect her children; tears fall as I press the computer keys. I will carry this burden of failing to protect my children with me always. I think of being in the courtroom where I sit and listen to the tales of violence in the girls’ life, I feel ill. My lawyer cross-examines Reginald, asking him about his use of corporal punishment on the girls.

Q- Gerald Walsh—Did you ever spank Buttercup?

A- Reginald—Once.

Q- When?

A- The time I took her from the Ukrainian dance supper.

Q- When was that?

A- That was in October, but I can’t think of the date. That was just before.

Q- Just before the separation?

A- Possibly two weeks before.

Q- Okay. Did you ever spank Rose?

A- Normal for our house would be, Sherrie would scream at me and say, “Reginald, do something with these kids; I can’t handle them anymore.” And I would. And I thought that I was supporting her.

Q- How many times would you have spanked Rose?

A- Five, six.

Q- Do you remember how many times before the separation and how many after?

A- I gave Rose the one swat on her bum at Waterford Lake after.

Q- When was that?

A- It was on the August 1999 visit.

Q- That's approximately 10 months after the date of separation, is that correct?

A- Correct. (Q. B. Div. No. 711, 767-768, 2001)

* * *

As I ruminate over this piece of the transcript, I am piecing together that Reginald hit Buttercup (18 months old) on two occasions: The first time he spanked her, I was at a school board meeting, and the second time he spanked her, was after he took her home from the community fowl supper where I was volunteering.

Sitting still in my chair is gruelling, listening to his testimony. My feelings are jumbled. I feel relief that he admits to hitting the girls, and sorrow that they were hurt under the guise of discipline. I silently pray, 'God grant be the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.' This is the prayer that sustains me throughout the week-long trial. Our children were trusting and innocent and depended on us to keep them safe. With a heavy heart I bear the weight of my responsibility for not keeping the girls safe.

* * *

"What are you doing?" I ask Dianthus as I walk in the house and see her sitting on the floor against the bedroom door.

"I'm making sure Dad doesn't hit Buttercup again," she quietly responds.

"What do you mean? Why would he hit her?" I question.

"She didn't want to go to bed so he spanked her, and when she started to cry he told her to be quiet or he would spank her again. So I am keeping her quiet," she carefully explains to me.

“Thanks for looking after your baby sister. Now it’s time for you to get some sleep my dear.” I give her a big hug.

Although I did not agree with spanking a young child for not going to sleep, I did nothing about it when Reginald spanked Buttercup. Since leaving the farm and starting life over in Saskatoon, I have not spanked or hit the girls under any circumstances. I have come to be an advocate against spanking which I consider to be hitting. Spanking is defined as striking a person on their buttocks. I recall being strapped on my hands when I was 12 years old by the school principal. In 1973 teachers have the right to use a leather strap to strike a student’s hands or buttocks for the purpose of correcting the student’s behaviour.

“Sherrie did you get your spelling homework done?” a classmate asks me as I walk into the classroom. The day prior I was allowed to stay home from school to see my parents off on their holiday to Hawaii. The last thing on my mind was my spelling homework.

Two weeks before my parent’s departure I have a horrendous nightmare. My incredibly vivid dream involves my entire family crossing a ravine on a suspended wooden bridge when my father slips and falls off the bridge into the water far far below. I watch as he fights the waves, and drowns. I wake up in a cold seat screaming, “Daddy daddy”.

Mom offers reassurance, “It is only a bad dream, dad is asleep in the next room. Now go back to sleep, everything is okay.” However, I remain firm that my parents should not go on this trip.

So the day after my parents leave for Hawaii, I walk into the classroom to hear, “You have to tell the teacher you don’t have your homework done. Everyone who didn’t get their spelling homework done got the strap yesterday.”

Being the honest young woman I am I walk up to my teacher and announce, “I didn’t finish my spelling homework.”

My teacher frowns and orders me to “March to the office, Sherrie”. Slowly I shuffle behind my teacher to his office. “Hold out your hands” he instructs. I reluctantly hold out my hands to receive three strikes of the leather belt on each hand. “You must get your homework completed on time. Now back to your desk” he orders. Crying I walk back to the classroom.

I can’t help but question, what did I learn from this exchange? I am convinced that all a child learns from being hit by an adult or parent is that when you are bigger you can hit. I recognize and I am aware of my own personal bias on spanking and hitting children. I am writing and analyzing this research through my eyes from my personal experience as a mother. I also write from my knowledge as a trained Adlerian Parent facilitator, and from a master’s level comprehension of Adlerian psychology. I look to the literature about what society says about hitting or spanking children; to help me understand what current society’s position is on spanking children.

Tralee Pearce (2012) commented in the parenting section of *Globe and Mail*, “Parents might be surprised to hear we have a ‘spanking law’ in Canada. . . . As a country we’re still spanking our kids, but whether influenced by the law, public education or our own ethics, we’re increasingly conflicted about it” (para. 8, 12). Today, Section 43 of the Criminal Code reads as follows:

Every schoolteacher, parent or person standing in the place of a parent is justified in using force by way of correction toward a pupil or child, as the case may be, who is under his care, if the force does not exceed what is reasonable under the circumstances.

It continues to be within a parent’s rights to strike their child (ren). Barnett (2008) clarified that “the words ‘by way of correction’ in s. 43 mean that the force must be sober and reasoned,

address actual behaviour, and be intended to restrain, control, or express symbolic disapproval” (p. 2). Alyson Schafer (2004), psychotherapist and one of Canada’s leading parenting experts, shared her opinion about the ‘spanking law’. She refers to spanking as hitting, calling it an ineffective form of discipline. Following are s. 43 guidelines of the 2004 Supreme Court ruling:

1. Parents can use appropriate and reasonable force and restraint for the purposes of correcting/teaching a child,
2. The parent must act in a cool and rational way, not angered,
3. The force must not be degrading or humiliating or harmful, and,
4. The child must be older than 2 years and younger than 12 years of age.

Schafer queried this 2004 Supreme Court ruling:

While this is now a more restrictive interpretation of the law than was previously in place, I ask would ask the Justices how the remaining elements add up to anything that will effectively change a child’s behaviour. If the blow is weak so that it meets the law’s criteria for not degrading the child, how exactly does the court think this measure will influence behaviour?

If it is so weak as to not be degrading, why do they exclude children older than 12? The court reasoned that this type of correction would promote rebellion and antisocial behaviour. How could an adult acting reasonably and treating a child “reasonably” and not “degradingly” bring that about?

I feel that the ruling essentially speaks from both sides of its mouth. Hitting is punitive and the punitive is by nature degrading. It affects all humans the same regardless of age. We once believed that husbands could use “reasonable force” to control their wives too. And no doubt some people and some religions feel this is still the case, but our laws have progressed to recognize that this is not the case. We must now show that society must find alternatives to hitting children in a vain attempt to correct them. All humans are social equals and this should be reflected in the law—regardless of age. (para. 5-9)

I agree with Schafer. I have seen first-hand how hitting damages children's sense-esteem and self-worth. How can we say to a child, you are so special and precious? I love you so much and then hit them. We are all equally deserving of dignity and respect, this includes children.

* * *

I contemplate the relationship between using violence and socially sanctioned spanking; I wonder if Reginald's wounding behaviour toward Dianthus can be vindicated? Painfully as if I have a knife in my heart my mind is violently pulled back to the courtroom to when my lawyer cross-examines Reginald.

Q- Gerald Walsh—You admit you kicked Dianthus on her thigh?

A- Reginald—I clearly remember kicking her once.

Q- Okay, once. Do you remember an incident as told by Darla White (Sherrie's sister), where you picked Dianthus up by the throat, pinned her up against the wall so her feet weren't even touching the ground?

A- That is not true.

Q- So you were never approached by the Department of Social Services about a complaint in 1997?

A- No.

Q- You never did that?

A- I did not.

Q- So it is a lie?

A- Yes.

Q- Dianthus said it to Darla White and Darla White has just taken the stand, and she's just lying?

A- She's not telling the truth.

Q- Everybody's lying. Sherrie lied throughout her entire testimony, isn't that correct? Isn't that your view?

A- Her view is extremely different than mine.

Q- I see. But Darla White is a liar?

A- I did not do that.

Q- Okay. Under what circumstances, again did you kick Dianthus?

A- (No verbal response)

Q- Not closing the gate fast enough?

A- No.

Q- What were the circumstances?

A- The fall of 1998, it was extremely muddy. We were not able to afford to clean the pens. The calves were in there. It had rained for the two weeks previous. There was mud where you would walk into that you'd be stepping into the mud approximately 18 inches. And she was opening the gate, and she didn't want to step into it. And she didn't open the gate enough while I was walking in and carrying the pails. I had walked in two or three times, and I had kind of bumped one, and she wouldn't get out of the way and I said, "Move," like, "open the gate more."

Q- Okay. So you filed an Affidavit in support of your application to get access back in January; do you recall doing that?

A- Yes.

Q- Okay. And do you recall denying kicking Dianthus in the Affidavit?

A- Now that you mention that, I probably did. And then because of all of this, I rethought it, and I did kick her.

Q- So your memory is clearer today than it was then?

A- This has been so intense, and I did that; so I had to admit that I did do that.

Q- Very important when you kick your child?

A- I didn't kick directly at her; I just kicked at the side of her, so she'd kick out. I didn't kick directly at her butt.

Q- Did she show you the bruises later?

A- She was not bruised.

Q- Well, how do you know? Did she show you or did you look?

A- I had often seen her in pyjamas. Like, I would have seen her in kind of a pyjama top. That night, I didn't see a bruise. I didn't kick her viciously like that; it couldn't have been.

Q- The incident involving the Lego, if I understand you correctly from yesterday, and please correct me if I am wrong, you didn't have a bad day?

A- No. I was in a good mood.

Q- Good mood. You came in, was it later in the day or lunch time?

A- It was approximately 3:30 p.m.

Q- Okay. Did you go into the living room, and were you sitting there watching the kitchen and what was going on there with the Lego?

A- Actually, I sat at the oak table. I was having a cup of coffee. The Legos were strictly in front of that table.

Q- Okay?

A- And the living room is adjoining, and you can see right from the kitchen into the living room. Sherrie was sitting on the blue sofa. She had also had a table with her flower arrangements, and she was sitting at the sofa where we were all in a line. We could all see each other.

Q- So the Lego was on the kitchen floor?

A- Right.

Q- Okay?

A- Because there's a thousand pieces. There's no possible way they would be playing with that in a bunk bed to build a car. You need a hard surface.

Q- And Dianthus's enjoying herself? She was building a car?

A- I still have it, yes.

Q- Having a fun time. You see from your advantage point—

A- Well, I'm three feet away. It's not like I'm far away.

Q- I'm not suggesting that you were. You see from where you are, Buttercup on her hands and knees, a . . .

A- That's not correct.

Q- Was she on her knees?

A- No.

Q- Was she crawling?

A- No.

Q- Standing?

A- She was standing on top of the pile. There was a thousand pieces. She had two fistfuls of pieces, and she had a piece in her mouth.

Q- Okay. Now, what did you do then when you saw this? What was your first thing that you did?

A- I yelled at Dianthus. I said, "Pick up those fucking blocks." I stood up, and I slapped her.

Q- That's the first thing you did. Now, one of the reasons why you're concerned is that little kid could choke on one of those Legos; isn't that right?

A- That's right.

Q- Yet you didn't take one step to take that Lego out of Buttercup's mouth?

A- I did after I slapped Dianthus.

Q- So the one thing that you slapped Dianthus for, you're not even doing anything to prevent the child from choking?

A- Yes—

Q- You're afraid that that child is going to choke on that piece of Lego?

A- I want them removed, so she can't pick them up.

Q- But she has one in her mouth?

A- But it was a bigger piece. She had her hands full of small ones. The bigger piece was kind of extended out of her throat. I had no control of which piece was going in.

Q- You, sir, hit your daughter viciously because she wasn't following your directions to clean it up?

A- No.

Q- You had no concern about Buttercup choking on anything?

A- That's ridiculous.

Q- You didn't take any steps to remove it from her mouth?

A- Yes, I did.

Q- After you hit Dianthus?

A- To pick them up and remove them. They were a threat.

Q- And obviously they were a threat right then and there, weren't they?

A- Yes. This is all happening in about five seconds.

Q- So you didn't just simply say, "Come on, Dianthus, you'd better clean it up. Let's get going. Let's get this out of Buttercup's mouth. And you'd better clean it up because there's small pieces here." You didn't say that?

A- That would have been more appropriate.

- Q- Indeed, that would have been more fatherly, correct?
- A- Correct.
- Q- I'm asking this in a question. Isn't it odd, in your mind, that you were in a good mood? You were in a good mood, and that one incident caused you not only to yell at your child, using profane language, but to also whallop her across the head or face. You're not frustrated; you're in a happy mood, and all of a sudden, trigger, and you hit your kid?
- A- I was terrified that she would die.
- Q- You're terrified that she would die, yet you didn't do one thing to remove that block from her, not until after you hit your child?
- A- In five seconds I removed—my idea was to get all those blocks picked up. The piece that she had in her mouth was big in proportion. Her mouth is small. This pen would be like this. It had stuck out about like this.
- Q- You thought she was going to die. How could you possibly think she was going to die and not do something about it immediately?
- A- I did. But I—
- Q- Why did you hit your kid?
- A- To pick the blocks up. You can't leave the blocks there. (Q. B. Div. No. 711, 760-767, 2001)

* * *

My head is thumping, my heart pounding, and my ears ringing. He is lying, just outright lying. He took an oath, he promised to tell the truth and he is telling bold face lies. I want to scream. The scream is deep in my heart, smoldering, throbbing, and demanding to erupt with the truth. *"He is lying! It's all lies,"* I yearn to scream out loud so everyone will know my truth. Trembling from head to toe, I hold it in, while I pray for the strength to endure this trial. He wasn't afraid Buttercup would die; he was demanding respect and immediate obedience from Dianthus. I watched as he dragged Dianthus down off the top bunk-bed and slapped her across the head. I watched as she writhed in pain from the sting of his powerful hand. I got up from the

chair to rush to her, to soothe her, but I was stopped dead in my tracks. I was forbidden to help my child, and I did not, out of fear for my own safety.

Twelve years have passed, and while doing my research I have an epiphany. Reginald broke the law when he hit Buttercup (18-month-old) for not going to sleep, and when he struck Dianthus on the head for not cleaning up her Lego and when he kicked her for not closing the gate fast enough. Our trial was in 2001, the 'spanking' law was defined more clearly in 2004.

I wonder, 'would I be grilled the same way today in cross-examination about my concerns about these grave incidents?' What does this say about our society and the legal system? What embedded societal beliefs give a parent the right to discipline a child by whatever means necessary? Necessary for what, is my question: To prove superiority? or to induce fear and instill compliance? As long as society continues to support hitting and spanking children violence will continue to be perpetuated. Because legalizing striking a child symbolizes the power imbalance between adult and child, is it such a stretch to apply this rationale to the power difference between men and women? Remember the "rule of thumb" where guidelines sanctioned a husband to discipline his wife using a branch provided it was not wider than his thumb?

I have come to learn that what takes place in the home is a private matter. Maintaining cultural norms such as keeping what stays in the home as a private matter is a common societal practice (Poulos, 2009). I believe I should keep silent about my discomfort about what took place in my home and try to make things better myself. Women are responsible for keeping the peace in the family home according to society (Morgan, 2000). Thus it made more sense to stay in the marriage and work on making things more harmonious.

* * *

I instinctively knew that I had to persist in my quest for supervised access for the girls to see Reginald in a safe environment. I held on to the reality that I could not protect Dianthus, Rose and Buttercup when we lived together as a family. I wondered if I had to leave my marriage to keep Social Services from investigating allegations of parental abuse, how could it be safe for Reginald to see the girls in an unsupervised setting? Bancroft, Silverman and Ritchie (2012) relayed how family courts are faced with determining risk to children in situations of male partner violence:

The interest in maintaining the strongest possible connections between children and both parents sometimes collides with concerns about protecting children from exposure to abuse and assisting them to recover from traumatic experiences that they may have endured. The need therefore arises for a sophisticated approach to assessing risk to children from unsupervised contact with batterers, one that incorporates current knowledge of the attitudinal and behavioural profile of batterers and its implication for parenting. (p. 190)

* * *

The week-long division of property and custody trial is one of the toughest battles I have ever had to fight. During this battle I receive many parenting battle scars because I was constantly reminded how I did not protect my three daughters. I must live with this reality and I now take responsibility to learn and grow from this pain. Often feeling weary from battle, and inadequately equipped to take on the legal system, I continued to fight the good fight, going into battle day after day. I want you to get an idea of how exhausting, overwhelming, and tedious the legal process is to help you understand what factors keep women in unhealthy and abusive intimate partner relationships. Thinking back to the court transcripts is distressing; however, it allows me a clear view of the pain Dianthus experienced.

As I read through this distressing fragment of the transcript I am able to recognize that Reginald is having difficulty taking responsibility for his brutality. I get a sense that he is unravelled by his testimony and unwilling to admit that his actions caused harm to Buttercup and Dianthus. I want so much for him to own up to the harm he inflicted on them. I recognize that change is a difficult process and change begins with self-awareness. Knowing oneself well enough to be able to discriminate between strengths and weaknesses is a sign of evolution. Being self-aware includes affirming wrongs done to others, making amends, and then consciously changing offensive behaviour, particularly when you are a parent wanting to protect and nurture your relationship with your children.

I am confronted with an epiphany. Nostalgia for the life I enjoyed as a young child with my father, coupled with the anguish of growing up without a father became sentimental knots that kept me in an unhealthy marriage for too long. I prayed that Reginald would change his cruel and hurtful behaviour so that we could resume being a family. I determine Reginald's minimization, rationalization and denial during the trial is self-serving. I believe he continues to be a threat to our safety. I believe that if Reginald confirmed his cruel behaviour in the courtroom it would be an admission that he had failed as a father. He might also be open to condemnation from the Court and hence society.

My thoughts drift back into the courtroom as I think of the testimony of Georgette Marple (social worker hired to complete the Custody and Access Assessment) as my lawyer questions her opinion on this issue.

Q- Gerald Welsh—Now, Sherrie had relayed a story to you that on one occasion Dianthus would come into the house or came into the house and showed bruises where Reginald had kicked her?

A- Georgette Marple—Yes.

Q- Could you tell the Court what you recall about what Sherrie had told you about that?

A- Well, basically that is what she had said, that there were occasions that Dianthus would come in the house and say what her, what had happened or that she had been kicked or, you know, because she hadn't done a task fast enough or good enough for her father, and he had become impatient and reprimanded her in that manner.

Q- And Georgette, if I can read your report correctly, was Sherrie supportive of Reginald in that regard because she was afraid? You say, "Sherrie states regretfully that at the time her perceptions were misguided and she would think that if Dianthus would only do the tasks better or faster, Reginald would not be upset."

A- Yes.

Q- Can you explain that?

A- I think because Sherrie was in a relationship where she was trying very hard to please Reginald, that with Dianthus as well, the same kind of thinking was involved, that if Dianthus would do things faster and better, Reginald wouldn't get upset because it was possible to appease him. If you did everything correct, he wouldn't get angry, that kind of philosophy. Sort of, you know, very high expectations on Dianthus and herself as to how they must conduct themselves around the home in regards to work ethic.

Q- Would it be fair to say then that Sherrie's view, as expressed to you, was that if she could just make Reginald happy, it would avoid him becoming angry with her and thus he would treat the children better, basically?

A- Basically, yes. (Q. B. Div. No. 711, 43-44, 2001)

Although I can clearly see now I did not realize during this period of my life how I had imposed my faulty logic onto Dianthus. I really believed that if I could somehow make Reginald happy he would treat us all well. I find how Evans (2012) explained the concept of "trying harder," helpful in my understanding of my frame of mind at this time. Evans described how the abused person would be blamed for the abuser's violent language and behaviour. The receiver would also then be subjected to emotional withdrawal. Evans explained how the recipient of the continuous verbal abuse and blame would come to believe she/he is truly responsible for the abuser's behaviour. Resulting in a notion that if one could just be good enough, fast enough,

and/or sufficiently compliant the abuser would have no reason for his/her angry outbursts. However, this is an emotionally, physically exhausting, and impossible task. This distorted thinking kept me in this destructive relationship. It took years to let go of feeling responsible for Reginald's feelings and behaviour; years spent in the marriage believing if I just tried hard enough things would get better and we could live together peacefully. I recognize that I need to role-model being self-aware and self-accountable so the girls know they are not responsible for Reginald's feelings and behaviour.

I could see how much the girls were hurt each time they heard derogatory comments about me from Reginald. I am reassured to find evidence to support my belief that they were indeed wounded by these verbal attacks. Children subjected to emotional, physical, and psychological violence both directly and indirectly through witnessing assaults on their mother hear an unspoken message. The message is the mother somehow brought on the violent episodes through her own inadequacies and unwillingness to follow directions. A child may internalize that his or her mother "is stupid, inferior, or worthy of ridicule; and that she is far less powerful than the batterer" (Bancroft, et al., 2012, p. 73). When there is no mention of the incident afterward, children again internalize that "something shameful and secret occurred. They may feel ashamed of their father's violence, but they are likely to be just as ashamed of their mother's degradation or humiliation or of what they believe to be her role in causing the violence" (Bancroft et al., 2012, p. 74). Because children are often unaware of the attempts of the mother to curtail or stop the abuse, they may view her as inferior and passive, thus worthy of little or no respect.

I soothed the girls after a violent episode or I would try to settle them so he would not negatively react. It was exhausting to keep peace in the family when I failed to predict what

would set Reginald off which was more often than not. My inability to create a safe home for the girls may have appeared to them as my inaction and lack of caring. I recall so many episodes where I attempted to stop the violence and abuse that was occurring in our home. I also saw how especially Dianthus (10 years old) was losing respect for me. I made a solemn vow to keep them safe and to earn back their respect. The courtroom was my battlefield for the brave endeavour to keep Dianthus, Rose and Buttercup safe.

Supervised visitation and safety

I advocated for supervised visitation; I could not reason how Reginald could see Dianthus, Rose, and Buttercup without protection. If I had stayed in my marriage to keep our family intact, I faced the possibility of Social Services becoming involved. For too many years, I thought I could keep them safe if I was there to stop him, but I did not have the power to change his behaviour. However, I have the power to change my own behaviour. If the witnessing of abuse is considered serious enough to warrant the removal of children from the non-abusive parent, then it surely must be considered serious enough to be considered in making custody and access determinations. In my search for literature to support my frustrations and experience I found a plenary speech from Supervised Visitation Network Worldwide Conference. Pamela Cross (2013) delivered her speech entitled, *Connecting the dots: The implications of violence against women for supervised access* in Toronto Ontario. In her speech she shared some aspects of the convoluted nature of supervised visitation:

Women are often seen as being responsible for the abuse they experience. They may be told that their partner would not be abusive if they were more “reasonable.” In this instance, reasonable might mean consenting to joint custody or, unsupervised access. . . . Many court-related systems hold women responsible for ensuring the protection of their children, which can place them in a very difficult position. For instance, there may have been child protection involvement, with a worker telling the woman that the children

cannot continue to be exposed to abuse. This may have led the woman to make the decision to leave her abuser and pursue custody with limited access by the abuser. Now, in her custody proceeding, she is being told by her lawyer . . . that she needs to support a relationship between the children and their father. (p. 8)

I was told to be reasonable and pressured to accept unsupervised visits; however, I could not in good conscience put the girls in a knowingly potentially dangerous situation. While reflecting about my feelings of determination during the trial, my thoughts return to the courtroom. My lawyer questions me regarding the environmental conditions would I would deem safe enough for Reginald to be permitted to see the girls.

Q- Gerald Welsh—What do you say to people [friends/family] who say that these children absolutely love their father and want to go to see him, unsupervised?

A- Me—Unsupervised?

Q- Unsupervised.

A- They definitely love their dad. I don't question that for a minute. That's very obvious to me, that they love him. They're very disturbed by the incidents that happen time and time again. They're very disturbed about Reginald belittling me and commenting on my mental well-being.

Dianthus told me, actually, which reminds me, Dianthus told me a story about how her dad told her, "When court trial is done, your mom will be admitted into a mental hospital, and she will have a mental breakdown. So you'd better be prepared for this." She was very disturbed by that comment. I am a very stable person in their life, and they look to me for support and guidance, and they need to know that I'm going to be okay. And I reassure them all the time. When I ask them if they think it's true, they say, "Mom," like, "You're okay. Everything's fine. Don't worry about it." But this happens time and time again, so I am not comfortable with the children seeing him unsupervised.

Q- What do you say to the argument that you're exaggerating all of this about the children and what they're saying about their dad?

A- It's been two and a half years, and this comes up time and time again, over and over again. They're either being hit, they're being yelled at, they're either being sworn at, or

else they're subjected to listening to the state of my mental health, that I'm fat, lazy, stupid, so on and so forth. It happens time and time again.

Q- What do you say to the argument that all you're doing is driving a wedge between these children and their father? You don't want the children to see their dad?

A- I actually work very hard at making sure that Reginald still is able to have contact with the girls. I just require that he have a supervisor with him.

If I witness a telephone conversation where the kids are talking, the girls are talking with their father, and I don't think they're being very respectful, when they get off the phone, we'll sit down and we'll talk about respect. And I'll say, "Listen, girls, this is your dad. You need to be respectful. If you don't like what he's saying, then you need to tell him you don't like what he's saying, and you need to hang up the phone." But it is not acceptable to be disrespectful, and I promote that.

Q- Is there anything else on the issue of custody and access that you want to share with the Court?

A- I keep hoping and praying that the girls will be able to have a good relationship with their father without him continuing to malign me and continuing to feel that he has to berate them, yell at them, hit them, swear at them, call them down. He told them he was embarrassed that they were his children, that they were city, little sucky, disgusting children.

Q- When did he say that to you?

A- Dianthus told me about that on the Easter break as well. It's just continually as time goes on, they start telling me more and more stuff about what he said and what they experienced. And it's just constant.

So, if Reginald can find it in his heart to stop doing these things, I think they could have a wonderful relationship. But, until that time, I think when he sees them, he needs to have somebody with him. (Q. B. Div. No. 711, 290-293, 2001)

As I reflect on my testimony in the courtroom I wonder why I have to convince the Court that Dianthus, Rose, and Buttercup are not safe alone with their father. It is exhausting to continually defend and explain that the girls will be hurt emotionally, psychologically, and physically. I bravely stand my ground in the courtroom. I do find it interesting; however, that

society is unwilling to tolerate abuse, so why do I have to defend my desire to be treated respectfully in the courtroom?

For example, “The City of Saskatoon is committed to providing a safe and respectful workplace, abusive behaviour and language, or harassment of any kind, is unacceptable.” Around this phrase bordering the paper is printed “Caring, Dignity, Courtesy, Respect for All.” This sign posted in the Saskatoon public library, it is also displayed in various public city buildings. So why is verbal abuse acceptable in my home with Reginald? Truth be told, swearing and all forms of disrespectful language are no longer tolerated in my home. Our society says we have the right to be treated with respect. It seems like society has a double standard, what happens in the home is a private matter even if abuse and violence are present; however, in the public realm disrespectful language is not tolerated. I fought for the right to be treated with dignity and respect in the courtroom so that my children would accept nothing less in their personal lives.

There are various battles a parent must fight and one I was willing to engage in was to stand up for the right to be treated with respect and dignity. What I continually found perplexing was that I had to fight for this right in the courtroom. Women and children deserve to live free from violence and from the threat and fear of violence. My thoughts return to the courtroom when Reginald’s lawyer tells me that I should be able to handle Reginald’s verbal and psychological abuse in the presence of Dianthus, Rose, and Buttercup.

Q- Mervin Kemp—But you’re a big girl, Sherrie. If they say the odd, let’s say Reginald does say the odd coloured remark about you, you’re big enough to take it? You’re 40 years old?

A- Me—I can take it. I choose not to be around somebody that continues to talk to me that way. If he wants to talk to you that way, I don’t have a problem with it. But when he continually talks to the girls that way, it’s very damaging.

Q- But you're not there. You don't know if he continually talks to the girls like that?

A- That's what they—

Q- I mean, it may be one remark said in the whole weekend?

A- They tell me that it's continual.

Q- But you're not there to hear it?

A- I'm not there to hear it. (Q. B. Div. No. 711, 346, 2001)

My gut reaction when I read this excerpt is Huh? Once again I am intrigued by the fact that I am fighting for rights before they become societal expectations. In a time before our society is promoting anti-bullying I am being told to “suck it up” and “you are a big girl.” How do I even begin to respond? I look to the literature for answers. When Reginald verbally abused me to my face it injured my soul but when he debased me to my children it wounded their souls. Harrison (2006) pointed out that children are harmed by hearing constant verbal assaults on their mother, and as such verbal abuse is as a valid concern for child protection agencies:

An amendment to the meaning of harm (made through section 120 of the Adoption and Children Act, 2002) took effect January 2005 and includes “impairment suffered from seeing or hearing the ill treatment of another.” This is a major acknowledgment of the significance of domestic violence as a concern. (p. 140)

I am relieved to see that society is beginning to recognize that verbal abuse is a form of bullying and a form of violence that must be curtailed. Although I bear the scars from the verbal abuse I suffered during my marriage, my goal at the trial was to stop my children from hearing any more verbal assaults. I know in my heart that Dianthus, Rose and Buttercup are being hurt by Reginald's continuous debasement of my character and mental health. Even if I am doing so before much research has been done to show how emotionally and psychologically damaging it is for children to hear verbal abuse and attacks on the dignity and character of their mother.

* * *

Staying in the marriage did not allow me to adequately protect my children, I suffer guilt and regret in this respect. I left my marriage to keep them safe; my choices are often more be challenging to follow through and I risk losing in the courtroom. However, I feel comfort in the knowledge that I do all I can to provide them a life free from violence. The following excerpt from the speech “A Proper Sense of Priorities” by, Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered in Washington, D.C. on February 6, 1968 resonated with me:

Cowardice asks the question, is it safe?

Expediency asks the question, is it politic?

Vanity asks the question, is it popular?

But conscience asks the question, is it right?

And there comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular –but he must take it because conscience tells him it is right.

Standing up for my children safety in the courtroom is the right thing to do although I am aware that my stance is not a popular one. I am taking a risk in the courtroom because there is no assurance the Court will decide in my favour, it would have been easier to agree to joint custody to be seen, according to the Divorce Act (1985), as a *friendly parent*.

In making an order under this section, the court shall give effect to the principle that a child of the marriage should have as much contact with each spouse as is consistent with the best interests of the child and, for that purpose, shall take into consideration the willingness of the person for whom custody is sought to facilitate such contact. (Section, 16, 10)

The reality in the courtroom is that simply by declaring Reginald as an abusive father, I face the risk of losing custody because I am engaging in *parental alienation*. The divorce act believes that the *best interests of the children* are that they have ongoing contact with both parents. There is presently no consideration given to instances of domestic violence as an important factor to consider. Although I did provide evidence that Reginald was abusive toward our children I didn't

slander him in the courtroom. Becoming conscious of how traumatic it is to be exposed to emotional and psychological violence I had to fight for what my *conscience* told me was right to keep the girls and myself free from further violence. I have the opportunity to stand up for what I believe in in the courtroom, when Reginald's lawyer is questioning him about his denigrating comments toward me and his use of profanities when speaking to our children.

Q- Mervin Kemp—Now, you heard Sherrie's description of the relationship. And there are a number of comments that she made. And I just want to go through those with you. She was indicating, firstly, one of the concerns she had was, making derogatory comments about Sherrie to Dianthus while doing chores. Maybe just comment on that?

A- Reginald—I don't understand what you mean.

Q- Well, running her down, running Sherrie down in the presence of Dianthus, while you and Dianthus were doing chores?

A- I guess the thing that I did do was, before Sherrie left, at each time she would get depressed and just stop, almost living. I would see that as being lazy, and I would say that. So I would call her "lazy."

Q- Okay?

A- But not through the whole time, but just previous to each of these times. There were other things that she did, previous to leaving, each time.

Q- So basically this wasn't a constant thing about—

A- No, it was not.

Q- —talking about Sherrie or something like that. Now, there was a concern raised about swearing, or using vulgar language. Will you comment on your own language and what is normal language for you?

A- Ever since I've been a kid, that "Goddam" cow, "fricking" tire. That's the normal way I speak. I always have. That's my normal way of talking.

Q- Are you meaning to offend anybody with your speech?

A- No. It's just how I always speak. I always did speak that way. I have spoken that way forever. I noticed a marked change, because that was common in our house, like, (inaudible) I'd say, would talk that way.

Q- You and your brothers would talk that way, or your dad?

A- Yes.

Q- That's just—

A- The “fricking” cow jumped the fence. Or she jumped out or we couldn't catch her or she kicked the hell—you know.

Q- She seemed to mention a concern with the word “stupid.”

A- Yeah. That's, “stupid” is a word I use often. I don't mean it. It's just a word I say. And it was never a problem up until the time that Sherrie got involved in this Adlerian parenting. And that now has become one of the biggest sins that you can say.

If you say “stupid” on the phone to the kids, which is just a normal way of me speaking, that's an instant hang up. And they hang up on me for the word “stupid.”

Q- But this was the way you spoke—

A- I always have.

Q- —before you married Sherrie?

A- Yes.

Q- And even in the early years of your marriage?

A- Yes.

Q- That's just you?

A- I always have been like that. But now there's a different reaction. (Q. B. Div. No. 711, 500-503, 2001)

Sitting in the courtroom as I listen to him speak, my thoughts scatter as my body shakes. For five days my life is on hold as if in a state of suspended animation. I grew up in a home free from violence, but slowly over time I accepted verbal abuse and emotional abuse in my life. Now once again I am able to establish a safe and violence free environment. In today's culture it's common for a movie to use profanity or violence. As a society we laugh and accept it, saying, “It's not offensive, it's just the way people talk.” I find this confusing because it conflicts with current societal messages that abusive language is not tolerated.

It's seems like I am in an alternate reality, sitting in the courtroom, listening to Reginald spew lies, lies, and more lies. There is a part of me that wants to stand up and scream, "Seriously, who do you think you are fooling?" But my physical body remains firmly planted on the chair in the courtroom. I squirm and wriggle inside my body as if there is a war waging inside of me. 'Get up, stand up and tell them he is lying' and the other part of my internal dialogue is saying, 'Be patient, the truth will reveal itself. All of his lies will be his demise. Be patient my dear girl.'

I remain patient as deep inside my inner recesses there is a tremendous battle. I hold on to society and the law, I need to be silent and trust the system. Sitting here in this chair I understand why women stay, this is such a big risk, I am taking. I am trying to prove that the man I married, the father of my children, is not a safe person to be alone with our children. I haven't been the perfect mother what if the Court decides I am not capable to parent the girls on my own? Is that why Reginald and his lawyer keep trying to say that I am mentally ill?, or why he continues to accuse me of parental alienation? What is it about society and the law that I need to be silent and trust that the system would work for me? I have heard so many women's stories about how the system failed them, I was terrified. Many times I considered going back to Reginald to avoid all this confusion.

I am damned if I do stay with Reginald and risk losing custody of the girls, and I am damned if I do stay away from Reginald, testify in court and risk losing custody of the girls. Somehow, I was able to hold on to the belief the truth would emerge in spite of all Reginald's lies. I think about sitting in the courtroom when Reginald's lawyer accuses me of trying to alienate Dianthus, Rose, and Buttercup from their father.

Q- Mervin Kemp—Sherrie, as you indicated at the end here, you stated that you want the girls to have a good relationship with their dad. And you stated very clearly that the girls, all three of them, love their dad very much and you have absolutely no doubt about that?

A- Me—No, I don't. I still care for Reginald very deeply.

Q- And you don't want to interfere with the relationship the girls have with their father?

A- No.

Q- And you're saying this because you truly mean this and not because it's the politically correct thing to say?

A- I truly believe that the children could have a good relationship with their father if he would stop doing what I've just said. I keep hoping and praying that the girls will be able to have a good relationship with their father without him continuing to malign me and continuing to feel that he has to berate them, yell at them, hit them, swear at them, call them down.

Q- And you believe it's very important for the girls to have a good relationship with both parents?

A- Yes.

Q- And you believe it would be in the best interests of the girls to have a good relationship with both parents?

A- As long as they're treated with love and respect, yes, I do.

Q- And there's no doubt in your mind the girls want to be with their father; they want to spend time with their father?

A- The way things have been going lately, they have told me that there's a lot of reluctance in going to see their dad because they're either being yelled at or sworn at or they have to listen to stories about me. So it's been increasingly difficult.

Q- Now, you know Reginald loves the girls, you don't doubt that?

A- I can't speak for Reginald to be honest with you.

Q- But, from what you know of him, you know he loves the girls?

A- (No verbal response)

Q- You spent 17 years with him, 10 years with the girls?

A- I guess I really struggle with how a parent that truly loves their child continually hurts them. I struggle with that. So I honestly can't tell you how Reginald feels. (Q. B. Div. No. 711, 293-296, 2001)

* * *

I continue to weep as I edit each of these stories. This chapter is the most harrowing one to compile, research, write, and edit because my children are the reason I left. This in itself is complex because had I left the marriage sooner, I would not have three daughters. I will forever have shrapnel in my heart from my years with Reginald. Children were my principle reason to stay and ultimately the paramount reason to leave. Bancroft, Silverman, and Ritchie (2012) addressed the complexities of family court proceedings when domestic violence and the children's safety are significant factors:

The interest in maintaining the strongest possible connections between children and both parents sometimes collides with concerns about protecting children from exposure to abuse and assisting them to recover from traumatic experiences they may have endured. The need therefore arises for a sophisticated approach to assessing risk to children from unsupervised contact with batterers, one that incorporates current knowledge of the attitudinal and behavioral profile of batterers and its implication for parenting. Furthermore, the approach needs to recognize the wide range of types of risk to children that batterers pose; level of physical violence alone is not an adequate basis on which to assess which batterers are most dangerous to children, as some "lower-level" batterers are among the most psychologically destructive. Finally, risk assessment must be undertaken in light of the long-term goal of creating a context in which children can heal emotionally. (p. 190)

Child custody arrangements made after a woman leaves her violent partner often cause continuing trauma for the woman (Astin & Lawrence, 1993). Consider the all-too-common situation: A woman must leave the relationship in order to keep her children from being apprehended by Social Services because the children are considered to be in danger in the abusive home. The woman; however, is torn between loyalty to the children and loyalty to her partner. When the court decides that the father has the right to see the children, the woman is further perplexed, wondering why she had to leave in the first place. Further complications arise

when the father uses the children to continue to harass and mentally abuse the mother. Continued contact is required to facilitate co-parenting arrangements. This was particularly true for me.

I think about my journal entry after Rose had spent three weeks with Reginald. The visit was traumatic for her and me because Reginald would not bring her back. He used Rose as leverage while he attempted to convince me to return to the marriage.

My journal entry *Tuesday, August 24, 2000, around 11 p.m.*

Reginald told Dianthus tonight that it would be good if Dianthus and Rose came for a visit the long weekend in September because I phoned a lot when Rose was there and he felt it was good for me.

Reginald believed it was good for me to phone and talk to him because then he felt a sense of control over me. My communication with him gave him hope that I would return to the marriage. It was; however, dreadful for me to talk with Reginald because every time I did I felt weakened. I described this experience as if he had a giant hypodermic needle that could extract all of my self-worth and energy leaving me feeling empty. On so many occasions Reginald would keep me on the phone for hours in an attempt to wear down my resolve to stay away from him. I was experiencing emotional and psychological abuse each time I stayed on the phone and listened to his rationale for why I should come back to the farm, “I love you”, “I will change, what do you want me to do?”, “What about our marriage vows, didn’t they mean anything to you?” “I want the girls to go to school on the farm”, “I’ll build a new house”, “You can’t raise the girls on welfare”, “the girls need a father, do you want them to grow up without a father like you did?”, and “I found the Mars Venus workshop to go to together, it will help us be better together. I love you Sherrie, I want us to be a family.”

When children are exposed to ongoing stress of watching their father become violent with their mother even after marital separation, they continue to be traumatized. Segel-Evans

(1989) contended that even when the mother leaves and the violence ends often the children still have contact with the abusive father. Walker (1987) highlighted the cause for “concern about the children’s cognitive and emotional development when raised by a batterer who has a paranoid-like pattern of projecting his own inadequacy and lack of impulse control onto others” (p. 138). Supporting this notion, Pagelow (1984) advised, “It may become desirable to avoid prolonged contact between violent fathers and their sons [daughters] until the men assume control over their own behavior and the examples of ‘manhood’ they are showing the boys [daughters] who love them” (p. 256). If a man who employs violent behaviour does not seek treatment tailored specifically to male partner violence, it is likely that his violence will continue (Pagelow, 1984). His way of thinking and destructive beliefs must be challenged and changed or the children will naturally be influenced by his violent model of interpersonal behaviour (Segel-Evans, 1989). Joint-custody is not recommended when male partner violence exists, Segel-Evans asserted, that sole custody is beneficial to the children’s emotional adjustment and particularly positive regarding the mother’s safety. Segel-Evans observed how:

Most batterers continue their abusiveness after the marriage, into the divorced parent relationship, in the form of control, manipulation and harassment over support payments, visitation times, and parenting styles. The children are always aware of these tensions and battles, and sometimes blame the mother for not just giving in and keeping the peace - or for being too submissive. The batterer often puts the children right in the middle, taking advantage of his belief that she will give in to avoid hurting the children. The damage to the children in this kind of situation is worse because it is ongoing, and never allowed to be resolved or have time to heal. (1989, p. 5)

I believe I took the right actions by imposing supervised visitation between Reginald and the girls. I find validation in Segel-Evan’s article, he shared how “the men who genuinely cared about their children for the children’s sake, and not for what the children do for their father’s

ego, have been willing to do the therapeutic work necessary to change” (p. 6). This process begins with a father being able to be accountable for his violent behaviour and accept how his actions led to supervised visitation in order to keep his children safe from further harm (Segel-Evan’s, 1989). When a father is willing to do what is in his children’s best interest he stops perpetuating the intergenerational transmission of male partner violence. I believe that I did what was required of me for the sake of my children. My hope is to role model for them a respectful assertive manner to experience interpersonal relationships and to eliminate the harmful influence of violence in their lives, now and in the future.

Haaken (2010) described how a battered wife and mother had witnessed and yet did nothing to stop her husband from brutally beating their daughter for more than a year. The unrelenting beatings ultimately resulted in the child’s death. Haaken extrapolated the social implications of this unresponsive mother during the trial. Many feminists recognized the “broken spirit of a battered wife” (Haaken, 2010, p. 146). While others judged her without taking into consideration the trauma she herself had endured, they could only see “the grotesque image of a heartless mother” (Haaken, 2010, p. 146). When a mother fails to protect her child, society responds with a jumble of judgments and feelings: disappointment, scorn, sometimes empathy and compassion, depending on the circumstances. When I read about a mother who did nothing to protect her child, I hear how ignorance is prevalent in male partner violence.

I think about my own circumstances and how much guilt and shame I feel as I recall and write about my own children’s suffering during this chapter of my life. After each story, I ponder, why didn’t I leave at this critical juncture? I genuinely wanted to have four children and yet I feel blessed to have three children. Holding on to the conviction that things would get better

I stayed for too long because there were still peaceful moments in our marriage and I longed to be a part of a traditional nuclear family.

* * *

Heartstrings

Now it is my turn to tell my story as Reginald's lawyer is cross-examining me regarding the critical incident that ultimately became the stimulus for leaving Reginald.

Q- Mervin Kemp—And then you're mentioning this Lego incident. And, as I recall what you're saying here in testimony this morning, you're saying Reginald basically hit her all over the place, and she was on the bunk bed and rolling away, and you had to basically tell Reginald to stop. Is that what you're saying this morning?

A- Me—She was on the top bunk bed. He pulled her off the top bunk bed and started hitting her.

Q- He hit her more than once?

A- Yes. And then after he finished hitting her, she was rolling on the floor in pain.

Q- Do you recall signing an Affidavit on November 12, 1998, in support of interim child -- or child support and custody? Do you recall?

A- Possibly.

Q- And if I were to refer you to paragraph 6(c) iii, you state, and I quote:

This past October the Respondent asked Dianthus to put Lego away that she was playing with so that Buttercup, our youngest child would not swallow it. She didn't listen. The Respondent yelled at her and struck her across the face and hit her with his hand. When she cried, he told her to shut up. I have observed the size of the bruise on Dianthus's face.

Now, when you're saying this Affidavit on November 12, 1998, you're saying he only hit her once?

A- It doesn't say once in there.

THE COURT [the judge]: Perhaps you should let her read that, so she can—

Q- Mervin Kemp: Sure. Maybe just read it. It's highlighted in yellow.

A- It said he struck her.

- Q- Is your memory of events maybe better on November 12, 1998, than it is today?
- A- That would make sense. I remember the incident. I remember her being on top of her bed. I didn't describe it well, but I'm not going to dispute that she was hit.
- Q- What I'm worried about is, I don't want to have a fish that's 6 inches big turning out to be a fish that's 12 inches big. (Q. B. Div. No. 711, 316-318, 2001)

* * *

A fish is a fish whether it's 6 or 12 inches, and the fish in this case is Dianthus being violently hit across the head with tremendous force. I will never want to minimize this horrendous ordeal. She could have suffered brain damage from the position and force of the blow or hearing trauma. This moment in time is forever seared in my soul. I feel intense emotion in the witness chair. At this point I am incredibly irritated to the point of being defiant. He hit her with extreme force; she writhed in pain. There is no justification for hitting a child across the head.

The fact that I did not bundle up all three of my precious children and walk out the door at that very moment weighs on my heart like a millstone. Dianthus was having a bath that night, and she asked me to wash her long, beautiful blonde hair. As I gently applied the shampoo I caught sight of the raw, red patch of skin behind her ear, and I felt queasy. Why wasn't this moment in time the catalyst that set us free? Why couldn't he see the damage he was doing? Why didn't I comprehend how serious this event was? There are so many societal messages that keep women in violent relationships. Women cannot make it on their own, children raised by a single mother are disadvantaged and become at-risk youth, single mothers and their children are destined to live in poverty (Flores, 2004; Spicker, 2002), women are responsible for keeping a family together (Morgan, 2000), children of divorce are vulnerable, children need both parents to be healthy individuals (Belkin, 2011) and a family sticks together in good times and in bad (Poulos, 2009). I still believe that families need to stick together, but it is different now; without violence and with mutual respect.

Time may have blurred details of this instrumental incident. When I recall this vehement moment my soul summons sorrow and my heart aches. My lawyer suggested it would have been more helpful to remove Buttercup from danger as opposed to striking Dianthus and then he posed the question to Reginald “that would have been more fatherly, correct?” Reginald agreed. He admitted to striking Dianthus and confessed that he could have been more *fatherly*. Yet when my lawyer asked him “Why did you hit your kid?” Reginald responded, “To pick the blocks up. You can’t leave the blocks there.” From my vantage point, Dianthus was violently chastised, for disobeying her father rather than out of alarm for Buttercup’s safety.

Society views a father’s role to be the protector in the family and the mother’s role to be the nurturer (Morgan, 2000). I think we both failed to fulfill our roles in this detrimental family environment. This event eventually became the incentive for my leaving. The girls and I had become so accustomed to the violence in our everyday lives. We stayed because we were exhausted and we stayed because we clung to hope experiencing relief when the calm came after a storm. After all, life has its ups and downs, right? Society views families as powerful when together and vulnerable when fragmented. Reginald had all the power in the family and it was destructive. His corrosive power shattered our family apart leaving us threadbare. For a time after I left, I felt worn out and broken but slowly and quietly I began to feel reenergized and whole again.

* * *

Occasionally I ask Dianthus to read through pieces of my transcript to verify her thoughts and feelings about my intimate research.

“Mom, you don’t still feel guilty about that? It was so long ago and you are a different person now,” Dianthus offers after reading an excerpt from my manuscript.

“I have forgiven myself, but it will always hurt my heart. You deserve to be cherished and celebrated, my dear,” I share through my tears.

I will always remember what happened. Although it took me awhile to wrap my head around the fact that I had to protect my children from my husband and their father, I did the right thing. I kept them safe, teaching them and showing them as women we deserve to be treated with dignity and respect by everyone.

Tears are healing. Sometimes I think it would be better to use waterproof paper. So many tears have I shed on these pages.

* * *

I think about how long my focus was on keeping our family together as I forgave Reginald over and over again. Although I did take the girls away to keep them safe, my intent was to continue to provide Reginald with access to the girls. I insist on supervised access because I recognize that this is the only situation where he is held accountable for what he says, and where the girls can enjoy the best side of him. As I reflect on this my mind is pulled back to the courtroom, where I am being cross-examined by Reginald’s lawyer, who claims that I too am saying derogatory comments, about Reginald, to the girls.

Q- Mervin Kemp—And your complaint and your concern with Reginald saying bad things about you while he has the girls, isn’t the reverse, as well, happening on the 360-some days that he never sees them?

A- Me—I work very, very hard at not doing that. I know that they love their dad, and I work very hard at not doing that.

Q- Well, even if you’re not telling them that directly, aren’t you telling them that indirectly, saying, “Listen, you can’t see your dad unless it’s supervised because he is abusive”?

A- They’re asking me for the supervision, so I’m trusting that they, because I’m not with them on the visits, I’m trusting that they know what’s in their best interest. And, as a parent, I need to honour that.

- Q- Isn't that the message that you're basically telling the girls, if you're not giving Reginald your address or your telephone number or letting Reginald know where you live?
- A- I did that for safety reasons, as I mentioned before.
- Q- But Reginald wasn't coming up to Saskatoon and harassing you? What safety reasons?
- A- I was fearful of Reginald.
- Q- He never drove up to Saskatoon looking around for where you lived?
- A- I found out later that he did know where we lived.
- Q- So what?
- A- I'm fearful of what Reginald is capable of doing, based on 17 years of marriage and different experiences that I've had.
- Q- Isn't this whole issue really about your bitterness and hatred toward Reginald and, therefore, not letting him see the girls. Isn't that what we are really talking about here? (Q. B. Div. No. 711, 365-367, 2001)

* * *

I face ridicule and condemnation in the courtroom but I persist in my goal to keep the girls free from violence. While I did restrict Reginald's access to the girls I did not ridicule him or belittle him. Reginald's resistance to supervised visitation with Dianthus, Rose and Buttercup became about his own discomfort rather than the best interests of the girls. Parents usually focus on the best interests of their children; however, in male partner violence, the abuser's needs take priority over the best interest of the child (Bancroft et al. 2012). The focus is always on the abuser. In the past when I kept silent the abuse continued but when I was the one in the courtroom speaking openly about the reality of Reginald's abusive behaviour, I was seen as alienating him rather than imparting my perception of the truth. In situations of domestic violence, couples cannot put aside their differences to co-parent effectively. Attempting to do so is often perilous to the women and children (Bancroft et al. 2012). Women requesting supervised visitation in order to keep themselves and their children safe from further violence are often "labelled 'implacable hostile' and unreasonable within the legal system" (Laing, 2000, p. 5).

Bancroft et al. (2012) observed the occurrence of societal vacillation between a mother's role in failing to protect her children from their biological father. Initially, society (health care, mental health, legal, child protection professionals, and other community members) condemns a mother from failing to protect her children from their violent father as they continue to live together as a family unit. However, once the mother and father separate and are no longer living together as a household, there is a societal shift that occurs with these same professionals becoming suspicious of the mother's motives for restricting the abusive father's access to the children. Mothers at this juncture are often referred to as overprotective, and vindictive (Bancroft et al. 2012). The courtroom was my battlefield for this brave endeavour.

* * *

As I think about my insistence on supervised visitation for Reginald my mind is pulled back into the courtroom where I am being cross-examined by Reginald's lawyer about the necessity of supervised visits.

A- I don't hate Reginald, and I'm not bitter towards Reginald. I actually pray for Reginald every night so that he, so he'd stop harming the girls.

Q- If Reginald had the girls unsupervised for a visit, they'd come back safe and sound to you Sunday night?

A- I haven't seen evidence of that.

Q- You haven't seen evidence that it wouldn't happen either, have you?

A- (No verbal response)

Q- You've done it before, and they've come back to you safe and sound, and no problems?

A- Rose's visit in the summer of 1999 was very, very traumatic for her, and I promised myself that I wasn't going to put her through that again.

Q- You're saying it was very traumatic for her because you're saying she wet her bed a couple of times after she came back. If it was so traumatic for her, she would have been wetting her bed while she was with Reginald, not after she's with you, when she's safe. How does that relate?

A- On one of the visits that she had with Reginald in this access, the first visit to the farm, she came back to— sorry.

(Q. B. Div. No. 711, 367-368, 2001)

* * *

I lose my words and begin to weep.

I am aching; my heart and soul are aching. My baby girl so filled with fear and shame. It's not fair. It's not okay. Just the thought of what Rose went through rips me to shreds; (the Court) forced her to spend a week with him because he has a "right" to see Dianthus, Rose, and Buttercup and to spend time with him before the trial. Dianthus (13-years-old) and Rose (8-years-old) went for two weekend visits and a week-long Easter visit; Buttercup stayed with me because I was still breast-feeding her. This incident occurred during the week-long visit. 'Did you know he would torment them, and humiliate them over and over again?' I sit here in the courtroom and endure all this ridicule, judgement, expense, and anxiety because I have vowed to not give him the opportunity to hurt them again. The judge (the Court) had ordered when I pick the girls up from the supervised exchange I wait in a room for the social worker to bring the children to me. Buttercup and I sit anxiously waiting to see Dianthus and Rose, when all of a sudden the door bursts open and they run in and throw their arms around me. As Dianthus is hugging Buttercup, Rose quietly walks up really close to me and whispers in my ear, "Mommy can you smell me?"

Feeling disbelief to what I just heard, I ask, "What did you say, honey?"

"Mommy, can you smell me?" She repeats, and then offers an explanation, "I had no clean clothes to wear so I had to put on peed pants."

My heart breaking, I reply, "No my dear, I can't smell you." I bend down and give her a big hug. A hug that is big enough for the two of us.

Reginald is kept in a room for 15 minutes after we leave.

The ride home is quiet.

Rose peels off her stinky clothing and jumps into the nice warm bubble bath I have prepared for her. “Oh Mommy, it’s so nice to be home. I love you so much. I am so glad you are my mom.”

“I am so happy you are my daughter,” I reply.

As she is soaking in the bathtub, I walk into her bedroom. I hesitantly open up Rose’s suitcase to face my fear; the putrid odour of urine-saturated clothes hits me as if I had been punched in the gut. I fall on the floor, my heart heavy and my thoughts reeling. Rose must have peed herself daily while she was on her week-long visit with Reginald, as every piece of clothing is wet. Rose, being her resourceful self, hid her soiled clothing in the suitcase to avoid certain ridicule and punishment.

Thinking about this now, I realize the emotional stress Rose and Dianthus surely suffered every day over the course of this court ordered ten day visit. Graham-Bermann and Levendosky (1998) discovered from their study of “Traumatic stress symptoms in children of battered women [how] terror and helplessness in the child can be expressed in many ways . . . physical symptoms of trauma that children might display include regression to previous physical or emotional stages [e.g., wetting the bed] (p. 124). Although the judge ordered the girls to go, I felt coerced into sending them against my better judgment and intuition. My lawyer convinced me that Reginald would be on his best behaviour because he wanted to make a good impression in the courtroom at trial. If I refused to send them I would be seen as ‘unfriendly’ and standing in the way of the ‘best interests of the children’ because they had a right to both parents. I knew what Reginald was like from past experience. I feel responsible for sending them when I knew in my soul that

they would suffer. I prayed daily for Mother Mary to put her mantle of protection over the girls when they went on that visit. I am grateful they came back in one piece physically, but 15 years later I continue to deal with the effects of emotional trauma that linger from this visit.

* * *

The following journal entries are from two years earlier, after Rose (6-years-old) visited Reginald at the farm alone. Initially she wanted to go for a few days, but she eventually stayed for 10 days. It was after this visit that I insisted on supervision when the girls were with Reginald. My first lawyer was a young father who was himself going through a divorce. He struggled with my desire to prevent Reginald from having unsupervised visits with the girls. After many confrontations, he suggested I find a new lawyer. We parted on good terms, but I had to agree it was not in my children's best interest that he represents me. I required a lawyer who could understand that not all dads are capable of putting their children's needs before their own.

* * *

My journal entry dated *Wednesday, August 18, 1999, 1:02 a.m.*

I need to document Rose's behaviour after the visit. It's been difficult. Rose peed in the bed the first two nights and then I needed take her to the bathroom around 1 a.m. to avoid any more accidents and to protect Rose's dignity.

I spoke with Rose on the phone when she was visiting Reginald on the farm, she told me that she had something bad to tell me but it was a secret. Now that she is home with me, she told me what the something bad was. Rose wanted to know why I married Dad. She didn't want to ask me on the phone in case he heard, she didn't want to hurt his feelings. She also said he spanked her but it wasn't really that hard, and she asked, "Don't get Dad into trouble."

Rose seems very disturbed and confused. Tonight she said to me that she loves me but sometimes when she looks at me she feels angry. A big statement for a little girl!

She has awful episodes that are different (she would become angry and defiant) than before. She is very emotional. She is also prone to violence. She has not wanted to talk to her dad after the first day back, saying simply she doesn't want to listen to him.

My journal dated Tuesday, August 24, 1999, around 11 p.m.

Since Rose came back I have been taking her to the bathroom through the night to avoid bed wetting. Rose has not had problems bed wetting since she was four. Now since the visit we are back to this behaviour. She is aware of it and asks me to help her because she can't feel it when she is sleeping. I am not angry with Rose about this, but with Reginald.

My journal entry dated Sunday, August 29, 1999, 11 p.m.

Reginald phoned; Rose answered the phone and was quite disturbed. She did not want to talk to her dad at all. I said just talk to him for a minute while I get Dianthus. When I came back Rose was sitting on the couch holding the phone on her lap. Very visibly upset. I asked Rose very gently what happened for her when she talked with her dad. She told me her eyes went all fuzzy and she felt she would get her nightmares back.

* * *

Why do we not validate children's experiences of emotional and physical trauma? For that matter, why do we not validate women's experience of psychological and emotional trauma? To be deemed battered; a woman must experience physical abuse and visually be black and blue. Why is being spiritually broken not enough to justify being battered? Why is emotional and psychological abuse so difficult to prove? Why is a mother automatically viewed as trying to alienate the children from the abuser rather than seeing her learning from past mistakes and acting as a protector? I am damned if I stay in the marriage to protect my children from harm, and I am damned if I don't stay in the marriage in order to keep them safe and protect them from their father.

Canadian literature is limited. Ontario is currently reviewing the Family Law Act and is taking into consideration the amendments recently made in British Columbia (2013). I focus on (Sec. 37) The Best Interests of the Child and (Sec. 38) Assessing family violence:

37 (2) To determine what is in the best interests of a child, all of the child's needs and circumstances must be considered, including the following:

(g) the impact of any family violence on the child's safety, security or well-being, whether the family violence is directed toward the child or another family member;

(h) whether the actions of a person responsible for family violence indicate that the person may be impaired in his or her ability to care for the child and meet the child's needs;

38 For the purposes of section 37 (2) (g) and (h) [best interests of child], a court must consider all of the following:

(a) the nature and seriousness of the family violence;

(b) how recently the family violence occurred;

(c) the frequency of the family violence;

(d) whether any psychological or emotional abuse constitutes, or is evidence of, a pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour directed at a family member;

(e) whether the family violence was directed toward the child;

(f) whether the child was exposed to family violence that was not directed toward the child;

(g) the harm to the child's physical, psychological and emotional safety, security and well-being as a result of the family violence;

(h) any steps the person responsible for the family violence has taken to prevent further family violence from occurring;

(i) any other relevant matter.

In the United States, particularly in Louisiana, there are strict laws regarding supervised visits: parents who are batterers are required by law to complete a treatment program before supervised visits are even considered (K. C. Evans, 2004). Also, supervised visits are first required before joint or sole custody will be considered for the batterer. These approaches show

that the best interests of the child are of the highest priority in Louisiana. As K. C. Evans explained, these approaches help to “weed out those men who only fought for custody or visitation in order to retain control over their wives and families” (2004, p. 139). Another important issue to consider as Jaffe, Johnston, Crooks, and Bala’s (2008) research also focused on the convoluted nature of custody when allegations of domestic violence are involved. These researchers stress the importance of taking into account the impact domestic violence has on the reality of co-parenting. Below are two recommendations that support my personal position:

In the face of a real threat of violence, victims who live in fear of their ex-partner are not paranoid, nor may it be appropriate for them to promote a relationship between their children and the other parent. In cases of ACV (abusive relationship), parents’ voiced concerns about their ex-partner’s abusive predispositions and their own refusal to communicate or reluctance to agree to the child’s liberal access should not be seen as unwillingness to cooperate or as manifestations of parental alienation. (Jaffe et al., 2008, pp. 503-504)

I have hope that Canada is becoming more aware of the multifarious nature of male partner violence. It is vital that lawyers, judges, and lawmakers become more educated about the dynamics of interspousal violence and its effect on children, because this new knowledge will protect children and women from further violence and make steps toward ending the generational transmission of male partner violence. I acknowledge how fortunate I was being awarded supervised visitation for the girls to visit with Reginald once a month in a safe environment. The supervised visits were to be for six months; however, with the aid of my lawyer I was able to stretch them out for 18 months. This is unfortunate because the girls, especially Rose and Buttercup looked forward to safe visits with their dad. His behaviour outside of the supervised visits continued to be abusive and negative comments continued regarding my mental health. Cross (2013) discovered how, “too often, judges make the assumption that a short

period of incident-free supervised access is the basis to end the supervision, rather than understanding that the supervision is why there have been no incidents” (p. 11). I did not allow unsupervised visits between the girls and Reginald. While I consider myself fortunate, six months is not long enough for someone to change with a strong desire and social support such as professional counselling and parenting education. I share an example of how Reginald’s motivation for seeking visitation with the girls was more about leverage than spending time with them.

* * *

I recall a heart-wrenching episode that happened in the months before trial. The Court had allowed Reginald supervised visits with the girls. Dianthus had a hockey tournament on one of the weekends scheduled with her father:

“Mom can you ask Dad if I can miss the visit, so I can go to the hockey tournament?”

“It’s complicated my dear, but I’ll call,” I reassure her.

Reginald—“She can miss the visit if you agree to meet me for coffee.”

Me—“What does my meeting you for coffee have anything to do with her?”

Reginald—“That’s the deal, take it or leave it. You are in contempt of court if she doesn’t show up.”

Me—“You know how important hockey is to her.”

Reginald—“Meet me for coffee and she can play hockey.”

Me—“I have nothing to say to you.”

Reginald—“Then you better have her there for the visit.”

Me—I don’t understand. We have nothing to talk about, and she really wants to play hockey. You are being unreasonable.”

Reginald—"It's your choice. Meet me and she can go play."

As I reach out to hang up the phone, I miss placing the receiver on the phone. All the anger I had kept so carefully tucked away in the recesses of my soul simultaneously began to emerge. Feeling anger rise up inside me like a tidal wave it came bursting out of me as I began smashing the receiver onto the base over and over and over again. I shook with rage. "This isn't fair" I scream as I smashed down the phone. "How can he do this to Dianthus, to us?" I yell as I slam down the receiver once again. "How could I have loved him" I shout as I crash the receiver into the phone. "He doesn't care about anyone else, just himself" I cry as I thump down the receiver one last time as it shatters on the floor. I begin to weep.

On the weekend when we arrive for the visit, we sit in the office waiting to for the social worker to take the girls in the room to meet Reginald. Dianthus is sitting in a chair with her fingers dug firmly into the armrests. The social worker arrives and motions for me to bring the girls. Rose walks to her, but Dianthus remains firmly planted.

"You know you have to go? I am so sorry. I tried, but you have to go," I plead with her as I slowly and gently peel her fingers one by one from the arms of the chair. My heart is pounding so loudly I feel deafened by the noise. Once I release her firm grip, she hesitantly walks to the social worker, who is quietly watching this ordeal.

"I love you girls. Have a nice visit with Dad," I say, trying to sound sincere. I walk to the elevator; when the door opens I step inside, and as the door closes I fall to my knees in pain, sobbing with every fibre of my being.

Here I am all over again looking out for myself. When I was in the marriage I would try to protect the girls up to the point where I felt threatened. I would keep my distance and tend to them after a violent incident. Now under court order I must send the girls for a visit. I forced

Dianthus to go because I didn't want to get into trouble. Yet on the other hand if I was physically hurt by Reginald or found in contempt of Court and put in jail who would care for the girls? I am damned if I do, and damned if I don't.

By complying with the orders of the court; I went against my instincts and what I believed were in the best interests and safety of my children. Radford and Hester (2006) point out that “women and children who do not comply with orders of the court are in contempt and liable to imprisonment” (p. 116). The excerpts that I have included show how cumbersome, burdensome, and overwhelming the court process is for a woman in the aftermath of leaving and moving on. It certainly would have been easier and less financially draining to avoid the court process, but I chose to step into that arena without assurance of the outcome.

Roosevelt's “Man in the Arena” speech can be transposed to speak to the courage and strength a woman reveals while living with male partner violence, when leaving male partner violence, and ultimately her survivance beyond male partner violence. This speech can also refer to my commitment to break the silence and speak openly about my experience of male partner violence. The following is an excerpt from the speech “Citizenship in a Republic” by Theodore Roosevelt, which was delivered at the Sorbonne, in Paris, France on April 23, 1910:

It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man [person] stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man [person] who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself/[herself] in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he/[she] fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his/[her] place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.

Roosevelt's quotation says that people are courageous when they dare to fight for what they believe in rather than remain silent. Dianthus' speech embodies Roosevelt's sentiments when she chose to speak openly to her school about her personal experience of family violence. Dianthus showed her bravery by stepping into the arena to share her story not knowing how her classmates would respond. The initial stimulus came from hearing students talk about what kind of people receive the food hampers they were preparing at Christmas time. She would hear comments like "I wonder if those people even appreciate the stuff we give them." Dianthus wanted her classmates to know, "Yes we do!"

Dianthus' speech

Primarily my research is done from my perspective with a sprinkling of thoughts, letters, and comments from others to fill in the pieces of my life. I include the next piece Dianthus' speech because her perspective is valuable. I worked so hard to make a better life for Dianthus, Rose, and Buttercup. The question, was it better for the children to stay together as a family or to leave and reinvent our family structure? This was indeed a struggle that kept me in the marriage to Reginald for too long. Including excerpts from Dianthus's speech is an integral piece of this conundrum; can I be enough for my children?

Dianthus was ten years old when we left the farm. She is 17 years old when she shares her story at Spirit Days where students can share in front of the entire school a personal story of how they overcame hardship.

I spent most of my non-school, non-sleeping time helping my dad do chores from about the time I was 5 to 10. It was all right though, because my dad was my hero, and when I grew up I wanted to be just like him, so I truly enjoyed the time we shared.

Unfortunately my dad didn't treat me very well. He'd pinch, kick, push, throw, and slap me when I did something wrong, said something dumb, or even when he was just in a bad mood. Luckily little kids often bruise while they're playing and nobody seemed to

notice. He never missed an opportunity to degrade or humiliate me. I was never fast enough or smart enough or good enough. I hated myself for not being able to live up to his standards because I believed that it was my fault. I admired him above anyone else and his acceptance of me seemed crucial to me. After being hurt time and time again I slowly stopped feeling. I became cold and disconnected with the world. It made me feel inhuman.

I hated my mother for taking me away from my dad, my home, my friends, and my life. Then as strange as it sounds, I began to realize that what my dad had done to me was wrong. While I didn't particularly enjoy being abused and humiliated by my dad, that was all I knew as a kid and so I had no idea that all dads didn't treat their kids this way. Once I realized this, I hated my dad for what he did to me and how he caused me to feel. Then I hated my mother once again because she knew what was going on and didn't help me for so long. Finally I hated myself. I felt like I was the reason that my family was broken up and I hated myself desperately for not being able to be good enough.

Over time I began to forgive my family, and over even more time I began to forgive myself. My mom got her life back on track, went back to school, and is now starting her first job as a teacher. She has been instrumental in my life these past few years, and I would not be the person I am today if it were not for her.

During the summer I worked as a camp counsellor at a Catholic summer camp. One day this summer I just randomly stopped to watch a few nine- and ten-year-old campers play soccer. I'm not sure why it was, but all of a sudden everything just clicked for me. For the first time in my life I truly saw how young a ten-year-old kid is, and I realized that no matter what I had done, what I had said, or how annoying I was, I never ever deserved to be treated the way I was. It wasn't my fault . . . Nobody ever, ever, ever has the right to treat you in a way that makes you feel less valuable than you are.

* * *

As I stood listening to her speaking in front of the school with such courage, I was filled with pride. My heart was also heavy listening to her speak about the pain she endured at the hand of her father and by my own inaction. This speaks to the importance of a parent's role in the child's healing process. She needed me to be a warrior princess; to get my life in order so I could

be there for her. I had to grieve the loss of my dream and take time to heal. I also had to allow her to grieve and express her anger towards me. Over time she learned how to do this in a respectful manner.

Bancroft (2004) acknowledged the demands of parenting, even without the challenges of helping children through the trauma of male partner violence. He commended and counselled women to not “underestimate the important, intelligent, and exhausting work you are doing by being a mother, striving to bring a healthy next generation into the world despite all the shrapnel that your abusive partner has strewn across the landscape” (Bancroft, 2004, p. 268).

* * *

My journal entry *Thursday February 18, 1999, 1:55 a.m.* reflects how difficult leaving was for all of us.

Rose is so special with a real flare for drama. She has a lot of anger towards me for taking her away from her home, friends, animals, and Dot (her godmother). I have to keep reminding myself the reasons for being here are as “good as they get.”

* * *

My journal dated *Monday March 22, 1999, 12:09 a.m.*

Today Rose was asking me about being divorced from her Dad. She was heartbroken, saying how much she misses Dad. I told her I didn’t like the way I felt when I was with him. I was angry, scared, and unhappy. She sobbed while I held her. It broke my heart.

* * *

My journal dated *Saturday, June 19, 1999, 6:40 p.m.*

I just had a fight with Dianthus. We had all watched television pretty much all day. I asked her to clean her room and turned off the television. She became quite abusive. She said she didn’t realize how fat I really was and that she wanted to go live with her dad. I said I still hadn’t sent the cheque for camp so if she wanted to go spend a month with Dad she could. She said she would never come back. She said she wasn’t afraid of me, and I told her I didn’t want her to be afraid of me and that being afraid of Dad was enough. I love her so much but I just

don't seem to be able to show her. I get her to all her ball games and enrolled her in summer camp but it just doesn't seem good enough for her (I am not good enough) . . .

* * *

I struggle with my self-worth, even today. Moments of self-doubt reveal themselves in movie montage fragments of my former life; including these caustic clips: ***YOU ARE NOTHING WITHOUT ME; YOU CANNOT MAKE IT ON YOUR OWN; Consider yourself lucky I want you. No-one else would; USELESS; COW; STUPID BITCH; DUMB CUNT; worthless; Shame; AFRAID; ANXIOUS; OVERWHELMED; NUMB; CAN I MAKE IT ON MY OWN? NO MONEY, living alone, and Where Do I Go From Here?*** I recognize when the reel of my old life begins playing, I push the pause button and remind myself how much I have to be grateful for, including my determination, and I value myself as a worthy woman and mother.

Tamas (2011) pointed out how revealing a lived experience with an abusive husband and father may appear to be dehumanizing to the perpetrator. It is unwarranted that as a woman and mother who has lived with violence to show compassion for my abuser. I sigh and nod my head as I read, "Empathy is a liability I had to overcome in order to leave" (Tamas, 2011, p. 262). I have forgiven Reginald, I wish him no ill will, and most importantly I no longer feel sorry for him. He is free to make the changes necessary to be a loving father anytime he chooses.

* * *

I am damned if I do remain silent, and I am damned if I don't remain firm in fighting for what I believe in, my personal power as a woman.

CHAPTER 5: On Becoming A Warrior Princess



Figure 7: Grandma's flowers. 1970.

Colour Photograph. 3½ x 5 (8.89 x 12.7). Saskatchewan.

This picture is a metaphor of my life. I exude confidence at 9 years of age as I proudly stand among grandma's flowers. My two younger sisters are in the foreground watching me as I assume the pose. I have the honour of being the first grandchild for my paternal grandparents. My birth is celebrated and I am treated like a princess; a young warrior princess full of confidence! When I look at this picture I think about how little I was when I lost my father, he is in the background getting into a car. His small image in the distance echoes his memory; he was an instrumental part of my early years until his death on February 11, 1973. Contemplating this photograph's foretelling I hold dear so many fond recollections of my father on my grandparents' farm. Although I have spent the majority of my life without my dad his influence and unconditional love has given me the enduring gift of knowing that I am loveable. This strong foundation of love and family grew from our family tradition of spending Sundays at the farm. Even today, I hold the beloved memories of the farm in my heart except now the farm no longer belongs to me.

Early in the morning, I secretly visit my home and a part of my treasured past, several years after leaving Reginald and the farm. I have good friends, who were close neighbours when Reginald and I lived on the farm together. I stay at their house one night.

My journal dated Monday August 18, 2008, 10 a.m.

I woke up at 6 a.m. and couldn't fall back asleep, so I decided to walk to the farm. It seemed so important to me to go there and see what it looked like and to see how I would feel. The trees have gotten so big, and none of my flowers or even the raspberries are still there. It was okay. I was okay. I prayed for protection that Reginald wouldn't see me, and he didn't. I think he was feeding the cows because there were no dogs in the yard and in the distance I could hear a tractor and cows.

I stood there like a statue staring at this chapter of my life; my ancestry, my home. Now it is just a house. Terrified to walk any closer thinking, 'Reginald might be inside and if he sees me,

what would I do? There is nowhere to hide.’ After awkwardly standing there for a few moments, I slowly walked back to my friend’s farm yard.

What a surreal experience. Sneaking onto my grandparents’ farm, my heritage. Yet this was no longer my home, and when I walked onto the land, up the hill and into the yard, I felt very aware that I was trespassing. I was dispossessed.

The idea that one day I would be a trespasser on this land seems ludicrous. I think back to how every week, my family, all six of us (Mom, Dad, my brother, my two sisters and me) would pack into the car and drive out to my grandparents’ farm half an hour away. We would arrive, topple out of the car, free at last, and run excitedly exploring this familiar farmyard. My grandmother was a fabulous gardener, and the air was filled with sweet smells of the various flowers blooming. Most of the plants were in a hodgepodge, scattered about rather than in orderly rows. There was no colour theme, but rather groupings of colours in every direction. There were bursts of bright pink petunias; orange tiger lilies; golden and burnt orange marigolds; blue delphiniums; pink and yellow roses; purple irises, brown-eyed Susans; pink zinnias; red dahlias; purple and white variegated pansies; yellow, white, and mauve columbines; white daisies; mounds of white babies’ breath; bright blue and soft pink larkspur; yellow, red, and orange daylilies; red poppies; Virginia creeper; and various shades of pink and burgundy hollyhocks; just to name a few of the multitude of flowers that my grandmother grew in her precious garden.

Nestled in amongst the flowers were an assortment of wooden creatures such as raccoons, squirrels, and ducks mixed in with ceramic figurines of a sailor boy and girl leaning in for a kiss. Twirling mobiles and elaborate birdhouses dwelt amongst the flowers that were created with love and displayed proudly by Grandma and Grandpa. The birds and the bees were in heaven here. It was a kind of heaven for me as well, because here we were loved and treated to our hearts desire. One special memory was playing in a fort we had here. It was nestled amongst two

old poplar trees and featured an old comfy couch and brick fire pit, where we roasted many a hotdog and marshmallow feast. My brother and I spent hours in that fort enjoying many great adventures. We genuinely looked forward to our weekly trips to the farm.

Even though it was old and very humble, I loved this house because I continued to have a close relationship with my grandparents and it had been my father's childhood home. I missed my dad terribly and; I felt close to him in this house. I intuited my father's spirit when I visited my grandparents on the farm and when I lived there with Reginald. Shortly after my grandfather passed away from cancer, Reginald and I moved into this house, as my grandmother had passed away two years earlier. When my grandparents lived in this 500-square-foot home, what Reginald and I used for our bedroom had previously been a parlour. The house was probably constructed before 1930 and was built from logs and plaster made of mud and straw. It had originally been built on the farm some 30 miles away and was later transported on a cart by horses to its current location. A porch and indoor bathroom were added upon its arrival. Reginald and I bought my grandparents' farm the same year we were married, moved into it 6 years after our wedding and lived together in this house for 11 more years. I took great pride in being a farmer and carrying on the legacy of our family farm. Initially, I loved living on the farm and being connected to my heritage, but over time it became a home filled with anger, desperation, and deep sadness. I cried regularly and felt lost and alone. Although I did not plan to leave permanently in 1998, I did not return.

While the farm will always be a symbol of my heritage and my childhood memories I will always treasure, it is no longer my home. When I did finally leave I endured the sorrow and stigma of being a divorced woman; no longer part of a conventional nuclear family. My children were now from a broken home since I had failed as a wife and a mother. Equally devastating was

leaving the family farm. If I would have been able to continue living there without Reginald I would have stayed; however, this was not a possibility because our farmyard was the home base for his farming operation. Reginald continues to live on the farm in my grandparent's home which seems so unfair. He knew how much the farm meant to me.

* * *

Reginald: Sherrie please come back home. I love you. I want you and the girls to come back so we can be a family.

Me: I understand that's what you want Reginald, but I am not coming back this time.

Reginald: It doesn't really surprise me Sherrie that you find it so easy to leave me. What I do find hard to believe is that you find it so easy to walk away from the farm, you're grandparents' farm.

It was not easy. It was not easy at all. Even though Reginald taunted me about leaving my grandparents farm I was forced to leave in order to keep the girls and myself physically and emotionally protected. I recall how manipulated I felt when Reginald would commonly thwart even my most basic wishes.

* * *

Although my actions seem to be my own, they are controlled by someone else. I recall sitting inches away from the television screen, straining to hear the volume set at a whisper.

Reginald screams "Turn that off," I hear. I feel my body tighten and tremble in reaction to the sharp stabbing tone of these words. I turn the volume down further until it is barely audible.

"The show is almost over," I plead.

"Turn it off. NOW!" I wince as these words cut through my ears to my soul.

I comply as if by instinct to avoid the pierce of another sharp verbal blow. With a heavy heart I proceed to the bedroom. As I lay in the bed, I feel robbed, confused, defeated, and powerless. I think about how this house had been built with love. This was my father's childhood home, the farmhouse with so many cherished childhood memories. I think about where I came from and the significance of my family home. As I lay next to the man who promised to love and protect me, I silently weep.

Living on my grandparents' farm was beyond my wildest dreams because residing on my ancestral land was a reminder of love of family. Grieving the loss of this connection to my family was incomprehensible. When I left I lost a 20 year relationship and my cherished family surroundings. I also left behind the majority of my material possessions at the same time I was grieving the loss of the family life I had always imagined. These multiple losses coupled with the pain and grief work I faced made this a momentous endeavour; moving on with my life. Adelle House provided me with a supportive community where I could start the process of recovery and learn to rebuild my confidence and sense of self-worth (Abrahams, 2010). In November 1998, my daughters and I moved into Adelle House, a safe house for women and children who have experienced male partner violence. Adelle House is a second-stage apartment building with 12 units designed to give women time to reorganize their lives, receive support, and heal from the trauma of domestic violence. Women and children are allowed to stay for a maximum of 12 months, 18 months under special circumstances.

Power, Synchronicity, and Xena

When I discovered I had free cable, it was as if I had been given the gift of freedom. I had so little money living on social assistance that allocating money for cable seemed inconceivable. Throughout the last decade of my marriage I felt worthless and powerless. The idea of being able

to control the television channels and volume was not only exhilarating, it was liberating. I could stay up as late as I wanted and watch whatever I wanted. Sleeping alone was more difficult than I imagined. After sharing a double bed for close to 20 years, I was unable to fall asleep until I was tipsy with exhaustion. I would find comfort curling up in quilts on the couch with the television on. This is when I discovered *Xena: Warrior Princess*, an American–New Zealand supernatural fantasy adventure series that aired in syndication from September 4, 1995 until June 18, 2001. Xena conveniently was broadcast at 1:00 a.m., long after my three girls were fast asleep. I was mesmerized by Xena’s beauty, including her long auburn hair, striking blue eyes, and physical and emotional strength. She was a woman who was afraid of no one, strong, independent, and powerful. She was no damsel in distress; in fact, she did all the saving in a brave, kick-ass way, overcoming the most difficult of obstacles. Somehow, watching Xena outwit and outmaneuver guys twice her size inspired me to have the courage to be tough and strong and to overcome my fears. I wanted so desperately to be a strong woman who could kick some serious ass, figuratively, if and when necessary.

Befalling on Xena and being instantly captivated by her audacious persona at such an analytical time in my life is synchronicity. During this period in my life, on my path of retrieving my personal power, Xena represented the quintessential woman. Many of the central themes of this television series resonated with me as I wrestled with reawakening my self-confidence: taking responsibility for misbehaviour and causing harm; valuing human dignity and life; personal freedom and sacrifice for a worthy cause; and how personal relationships including friendships are instrumental; and how tackling tough ethical issues are part of life. Channeling my courage with Xena’s essence, my brave warrior princess heart beat strong as I began to confront my fears. I had no idea at the time how my undiscovered feminist was drawn to Xena’s

fierce spirit. When I look back at this period in my life I see this as a pivotal time of personal involvement. I was beginning to see myself and the world through different eyes. My fascination with Xena became the stimulus for my fierce determination to retrieve the confidence of my younger self.

Using phrases from my silkscreen; now *feeling free to be something more . . .* I begin to move forward and persist in defining what is important to establishing power in my life. I am prepared to take responsibility for my role in a failed marriage and parenting ineffectiveness. I rediscover the fundamental value of human dignity and self-worth. I become painfully aware of my lack of personal freedom and begin to focus on liberation from oppression. Viewing Xena, I learn about sacrifice for a greater good. I used to believe that meant keeping my family intact but now I understand it as redefining family. I learn to lean on friends and family and rediscover the value of friendship. I also address some ethical dilemmas in my life, such as, is it in the best interests of the children to have two parents, if one parent is destructive? My aim in *breaking free* is to honourable tap into my *unlimited potential* with *love* for myself and my girls, to create a life free from violence.

* * *

I recently heard this passage, “Fear causes inaction and inaction causes pain, Q.E.D., fear causes pain” (Kurtzam, Orci, & Iscove, 2013). This quote resonated with me because I believe fear held me in an unhealthy marriage for many years of my life. Naparstek (2004) associated fear as a debilitating position. I was so tired of being afraid; afraid of doing nothing, afraid of doing the wrong thing, and afraid of standing up to Reginald. I was afraid to acknowledge the detrimental environment I was living in by concentrating on the ‘good times’ which also kept me in this relationship (Walker, 1979). Part of my recovery was accepting that this relationship was

more destructive than caring. There were positive and even happy times; after all I had three precious children as a result of this 17-year marriage. Then again to this day it is difficult to recall the good memories and even more difficult to talk about them without eliciting the emotional distress from this period of my life.

Transcending “victim mentality” (White, 2011, p. 84) becoming self-actualized and empowered are the cornerstones to moving beyond the violence. Xena provided a powerful female role model that I could live vicariously through during the aftermath of trauma. With steadfast courage I began to regain my personal power to reclaim my sense of self. Validating my traumatic experiences made possible reconnecting with others in meaningful ways (Copeland & Harris, 2000). Overcoming the effects of trauma has been one of the most challenging battles of my life. Having experienced emotional and psychological abuse for most of my marriage, I am expected by family and friends to act normal, feel comfortable, and be nonreactive when in the Reginald’s presence to prove that I am healed. I found solace as I watched Xena struggle with her inner demons, because it helped me confront my personal demons. Unlike Xena, my past offenses did not include being a warlord or killing and pillaging, and yet I did fail to keep my children safe from harm. My intimate torments, guilt and shame plagued me because I continued to expose the girls to harm by living with injustice and violence for too long. Xena fought for the greater good of human kind and I fight for personal liberty and power. I admire Xena’s courage, and I emulate her fearlessness and perseverance as I continue to move beyond male partner violence. Reclaiming my power includes conquering my fears, overcoming my shame, and reallocating my energy.

* * *

How we view the world determines what we see. Xena lives in a male-dominated world in which she wields awe-inspiring power over men, and yet they are drawn to her strength and beauty. In our patriarchal society, powerful women are often perceived as a threat to traditional male masculinity which includes social norms of being a man (Cohen, 2010). Chatzifotiou (2008) reported how these prevailing sociocultural views perpetuate male partner violence:

Men are seen as dominant (and thus strong, active, rational, authoritarian, aggressive, and stable) and women as dependent (and thus submissive, passive, and non-rational). It is these stereotypes and definitions, which reflect social attitudes, that permit the expression of male violence as “natural” and justified. (p. 113-114)

Johnson-Bailey (2004) examined the importance of considering issues of power when conducting narrative research. She asserted that for feminist researchers, power is present within social systems and must be addressed. Gluck and Patai (1991) focused on how “a critique of traditional concepts and structures that have marginalized women materially and psychologically, in the world and even in their own souls” (p. 139) needs to be acknowledged and changed. Women internalize the societal message that they are the weaker sex which is untrue. I now see how powerful women are and I now appreciate my value and personal worth as a woman.

A well-known feminist discovered that reflecting on her past from a different perspective enabled her to grow and change in practical ways (hooks, 1998, p. 432). This practical change may prove to be helpful in living a fuller life. I believe that telling and hearing stories about surviving male partner violence is instrumental in facilitating women’s healing. Sharing stories interconnects and enlightens women and supplies us with the strength to move beyond the abuse. In my life being a part of a group of women aided in my recovery from the power of toxic messages I had internalized. When I think about how Xena persisted in overcoming her past I am

inspired to join in the battle to regain my personal power by being true to my values. When I stayed with Reginald in a violent marriage I lived with distress and felt powerless. However, when I confronted fear and listened to my intuition I began to live a wholesome life. This process included standing up to Reginald in court, and applying for and receiving societal supports: the Social Assistance program; Adelle House; the Family Support Centre; domestic violence psychoeducational groups; free individual counselling; food hampers from my church; and the support and encouragement from my family and friends. I would not be the woman I am today without all the help I received and was willing to accept. Moving beyond male partner violence also involved rebuilding my life emotionally and financially. I had to break free of the negative societal messages and let go the internalized stigma I accepted. Instead of feeling shame for living on social assistance for 3 years and in Adelle House for 18 months, I feel grateful for the blessing of societal programming and assistance. The path to recuperating my personal power has been a lengthy endeavour, often full of twists and turns, hurdles and potholes; however, finding my personal power has been worth every moment.

“The best people possess a feeling for beauty, the courage to take risks, the discipline to tell the truth, the capacity for sacrifice. Ironically, their virtues make them vulnerable; they are often wounded, sometimes destroyed.” Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961)

Sharing this incredibly intimate piece of myself and my life with male partner violence makes me vulnerable. I risk facing sociocultural stigma by disclosing this uncomfortable issue. People may think I was foolish for staying or believe that I allowed these things to happen. There is so much shame in the past: shame that I am damaged, broken, and faulty, as a result of the abuse I suffered. I find the courage to share my shame-filled stories because the path that leads

me beyond the shame of male partner violence is full of revelations. I have come to understand that important messages come when my heart is ready to hear them.

I am sitting in church one Sunday morning; as I listen to the first sermon father Gerry speaks in our parish I am inspired.

“The Latin word impedimentum was initially used to refer to the soldier’s baggage, equipment, and even at times their armour. The word we are now familiar with is impede. The soldiers would leave their baggage behind if they thought it would impede or slow down their progress. We get caught up in our baggage today. Have you thought about how your physical belongings slow you down as you get bogged down by them?”

I find myself ruminating over this word impedimentum. I think about how my grandparents’ farm had impeded my leaving Reginald. I think about how all my personal belongings which included childhood picture albums had become impediments to moving away and on with my life. I think about losing my father and mother. All of their personal belongings did not impede their death. I held on for so long to a dream, a family farm, and baggage that impeded my freedom. I now understand that I have my memories and I can share my stories with my children so those memories will live on. I now realize that hanging on to a dream hard enough or long enough does not have the power to make it real. I have a new dream; to be free, to be safe, and to love myself; to never feel shame again.

Shame, guilt, and fear are psychological barriers uphold rigid social norms that manifest themselves as impediments to individual choices and behaviors (Pick & Sirkin, 2010). I am convinced that the cornerstone of male partner violence is shame. Shame kept me silently drowning in the well of *I deserve to be treated this way*. Brown (2008) described the corrosive shame of a survivor:

The red-hot waves of self-disgust and embarrassment that rise up and fill so many survivors of trauma, making them want to hide and not show themselves again. . . . This sense of being contaminated, dirty, defiled, and spoiled in some integral way becomes a core wound that informs and distorts other perceptions. There is the sense that they have failed themselves, violated their own standards. . . . Even [when people have] been dealt a set of impossible no-win choices, the stinging self-assessment is that they are at fault. (p. 108)

When I write about the psychological, financial, spiritual, sexual, physical and emotional trauma I endured, it appears on the paper as a marker of this tempestuous chapter of my life.

I have come to accept that I may never find acceptance and validation from Reginald for the pain I suffered. I hear a flash of admission from Reginald during a telephone conversation while he attended Alternatives to Violence for Men, a 16-week group for men who have assaulted their intimate partners.

Reginald phoned today. I spoke with him because he said he had something important to tell me.

"You know I have been going to those classes?" Reginald probes.

"Yes, you had mentioned it before." I cautiously respond.

"You remember the night you left?" He asks.

"Yes." I can feel my stomach twist and turn as I answer.

"Well, we learned in class today that when you didn't want sex and we did anyway, they call that rape. Did you know that?"

"Yes, Reginald. I did know that, and that was not the first time." I answered softly scarcely breathing.

"Is that why you were crying?" He asked.

"I was scared of you Reginald and I still am." I inform him somehow feeling the bonds of silence break away.

Hearing Reginald share how others had informed him how his actions were violent was bittersweet. While I felt relief for his acknowledgement, I knew it was only a matter of time before he would justify his violent behaviour to cover up his uncomfortableness (Bancroft, 2002). Yllö (1996) described marital rape to be “the violation of self-determination and the breach of trust” (p. 6). I have often questioned myself about how I could let him do those things to me. The truth is I didn’t let him do those things to me. I did not give him my permission, but he did ask for my forgiveness. When there are problems in a marriage a good wife/woman forgives her partner and tries to do better, believing she is never good enough. When I disclosed that my life was miserable, I was blamed for not measuring up by Reginald. Women are responsible for keeping up outward appearances in intimate relationships (Morgan, 2000).

Brown identified that despite “society’s relative new openness to discussing other emotions like fear and anger, shame remains taboo” (2007, p. 3). Male partner violence is very much an issue of shame. I define shame as ‘I am bad’ and guilt as ‘I did something bad’. I live with the reality that I stayed in a violent marriage. Shame depends on secrecy and silence to persist and flourish (Brown, 2007). Brown referred to shame as a silent social epidemic that even mental health professionals, researchers, and doctors avoid. At a very young age I learned not to be a tattletale. I can hear my mom, “Shame on you. Nobody likes a tattletale”. I decided to avoid loneliness and criticism, that unless someone was bleeding, it was futile to share injustice and grievances with adults.

Xena lived for a time as a warlord; she had much remorse about her past deeds. I am reminded of Xena’s perseverance through her shame as she made a huge shift in her life. At the beginning of each episode the narrator would announce with a flamboyant imposing voice “In a time of ancient gods, warlords and kings, a land in turmoil cried out for a hero. She was Xena, a

mighty princess forged in the heat of battle. The power. The passion. The danger. Her courage will change the world” (Fugate et al., 1995). As I stood in the ruins, and my world was crumbling around me, Xena metaphorically came to my rescue. In her I was able to envision courage in myself. Courage to examine the life I left behind.

I have moved on and healed, but the trauma I have experienced will always be a part of who I have become. Fifteen years after I left Reginald, I continue to be uncomfortable when I know he will be nearby. I may never be comfortable in his presence and why do I have to prove that I can feel safe with him? Why do I have to prove anything, anyway? I have already established that I am resilient and I have evolved into a better version of myself, as a woman and a mother. Xena role modelled how a woman can overcome her past transgressions; I have fought many battles in court and throughout my education career. Through accepting responsibility for my wrongdoings, I have reinvented myself.

In the context of my research I think about the process of recreating myself. My daughter asked me why I looked so depressed in all the old photographs of when her dad and I lived together. It is challenging to appear happy when living with male partner violence. I feel fortunate that the court ordered supervised visitations for Reginald with the girls, so I did not have contact with him. Unlike Xena, I couldn’t kick Reginald’s ass. My life is not a television show. Now I have the courage to face him. I have overcome my debilitating fear of Reginald, it has been a slow process as I illustrate in the following story. This episode occurred in the months preceding my final departure. I was beginning to challenge Reginald’s disrespectful and abusive behaviour no longer willing to make excuses him.

As I stood there looking at all the dirty dishes on the counter and table Reginald walks into the kitchen. The night before I had prepared a large meal for my family and I had not yet had a chance to wash them.

“What have you been doing all day? Why are the dishes not done? This house is a mess,” Reginald bellows.

“I will get them done. I’ve been busy with other things. I was working in the garden,” I explain.

“There are no excuses for the house looking like a pig sty,” he rants.

“I will get them done,” I say in an attempt to reassure him.

I think to myself, ‘so they are not done yet. Big deal! Can’t he see how nicely stacked they are?’

“You are so lazy and useless. I can’t stand this. I will not put up with this shit,” he screams as he waves his arms scattering the stacks of dishes all over the floor. I am startled by the permeating noise of shattered dishes.

As I scramble for the door I yell, “I’m not cleaning that up.” I run as fast as my legs will go without looking back. I run outside and head for the creek. Glancing back I note that Reginald is not following me so I slow down and begin to walk. I wander through the bush on the cattle trails. ‘It is so peaceful here’ I think as I meander through the trees. ‘Why does he think he can yell at me like that?’ I wonder. ‘I know I have to go back to the house eventually, but for now I am going to enjoy the fresh air and the silence.’ I decide.

Slowly I was becoming aware of the reality of my life with Reginald.

During the two separations in our marriage I sought guidance from counsellors. On more than one occasion the counsellor would say, Sherrie “the only person you have the power to

change is yourself.” Although these words ring in my ears, this truth echoed in my heart and soul for many years before I was able to fully comprehend its implication. My moment of truth began with the realization that a life without violence would involve me doing something different. I did not want to leave Reginald or hurt him, but I did want to embrace my personal power as a valiant woman and mother. Xena often felt afraid; however, she persisted with her goal to fight injustice. I fight injustice in my own way; through this research I share my lived experience of living with, leaving, and moving past the trauma of male partner violence.

Through Xena, I discover my warrior woman heart beat strong within me. Using a feminist lens to explore my story allows me to address the issue of power imbalances when counselling women who have experienced male partner violence. Power was an issue in my relationship with Reginald. Gilbert (1980) proposed the importance of “understanding the sex-role socialization and the ways in which women as a group are hurt by that socialization” (p. 245). Understanding this enables us to validate the woman’s personal experience in our society.

As a woman I understood that to be a good wife I must be faithful, compliant, and indulge Reginald’s needs above my own. I must also be a good cook, keep the house clean, and be ready to carry out Reginald’s requests (Morgan, 2000). While I was willing to be a loyal loving wife and care for Reginald I was no longer willing to go against my own values and beliefs. This was the start of my desire to be treated with respect, to no longer fear a hostile reaction when I refused a request, and be free to hold an independent opinion. I was determined to stand up for my rights and when I began my life over there was a shift of power within me.

During my research I discovered the term *survivance* this concept combines survival, endurance, resilience, and determination. Gerald Vizenor (2008) a prolific Native American writer, credited with redefining the term “survivance” to communicate Native Peoples embrace

on to their cultural legacy and identity. Survivance involves a person's ability to experience trauma resiliently, recognizing that we are changed by the experience but not diminished by it. Vizenor (2008) focused on survivance stories and shared how these "stories are renunciations of dominance, detractions, obtrusions, the unbearable sentiments of tragedy, and the legacy of victimry" (p. 85). Originally survivance was used to describe the cultural survival of the French prior to the Quiet Revolution in Quebec in the 1960's. Resilience comes from finding connection; Vizenor advocated that through the oral tradition of telling of stories, First Nations peoples find strength and courage.

I believe survivance could also be used to describe women who have the endurance; resistance, resilience, and the perseverance to live with, leave, and to move beyond male partner violence. I believe survivance speaks to a person's ability to keep her/his identity and dignity despite coping with oppression. Weiss (2004) insisted that by referring to women as survivors, "we lose sight of the fact that they were once simply people [women]" (p. 8). For me this embodies why I am drawn to the use of survivance over survivor. Survivor serves to further objectify a woman; that she has inexplicably been transformed into an 'other'. Personally I refer to myself as a woman who has seized survivance; in this way I continue to embrace myself as a woman. Like Xena who embraced her femininity and saw it as a source of power; I now see my strength as a woman. My source of strength comes from resisting acquiescence. My soul is initially forged with reverence and love; although loss and pain has become a stratum in my core.

My story is a tale of survivance during and beyond male partner violence. Much like Xena, I view myself as a resilient, strong, determined, and phenomenal woman. Retrospectively, I am amazed at how I was able to so effectively create structure and order in such a turbulent period of my life. During the first few months of restructuring my life, I found a safe place to

live for the next year with in-house counselling and support, applied for and received social assistance, secured a lawyer, and petitioned the court for sole custody of the girls. On my quest of keeping Dianthus, Rose and Buttercup safe I encountered many obstacles; the toughest campaign was fulfilling my financial obligations. I could not find employment that offered a wage to sufficiently support my family and the money that I would receive from Reginald would be allocated for legal expenses. Even when weary from fighting this seemingly endless legal battle, I persevered. While I am resilient in this endeavour, I believe it is more than resilience that kept me moving forward on this new path.

I stayed in the marriage for honourable reasons; loyalty, love, commitment, and family; however, by staying in an abusive marriage I began to feel powerless. Jones (1994) described how a woman feels powerless as a result of victimization:

The process of victimization consists of (1) first putting the victim in a position of powerlessness relative to the victimizer, and then (2) repeatedly impressing the victim with his or her powerlessness, including the powerlessness to escape, until the victim adopts passive and compliant behaviour to stay alive. (p. 181)

In this way an abuser holds power over his victim until she is lacking vigour and familial and societal supports. Words have power. The scars from the emotional violence in my marriage have been transposed onto my silkscreen; ***You are nothing without me, You cannot make it on your own, I will never let you go, Consider yourself lucky I want you. No-one else would, useless, worthless, cow, stupid bitch, and dumb cunt.*** Living with male partner violence is emotionally and physically exhausting. Sharing my stories has afforded me the opportunity to move from a position of powerlessness to a position of power—not power over others, but power with others (Jones, 1994).

I have adopted a Japanese proverb as my mantra *fall down seven times, get up eight*. The reality is successful people face setbacks too. When I heard “never give up, never surrender” in the movie *Galaxy Quest* (1999), I added this optimistic quote to my repertoire. Xena also modelled this attitude. There was no quest too dangerous for her to attempt. Xena never gave up. I would often observe how Xena faced adversity with fierce determination unwilling to surrender even when the odds were against her. If her first attempt failed she would come up with an alternate plan and try again. I often found myself picking myself up after a failed attempt to devise a new plan; I have learned that there are numerous ways to reach my goals.

I was not physically strong enough to keep myself safe in a toxic environment. The belief that I was at fault: for my children’s trauma, my failed marriage, and for Reginald’s discontent is what kept me silent for so long. I have taken responsibility for my part in my family’s trauma and I have learned from my mistakes. I release the blame that did not belong to me and I have made the commitment to grow and learn. Telling this story is part of my healing and yet I wonder if it is appropriate to share my story? Not everyone in academia is comfortable with my decision to share that I am a woman who has lived with, left, and moved beyond male partner violence. Family secrets are divulged, painful memories are forever marked on this paper for all to read, and societal messages echo in my mind, *no one likes a tattletale, Sherrie*. I balk at the notion of being a tattletale. I am telling the truth about a societal injustice in the world that affects all of society.

Mehl-Madrona (2005) upheld the “healing power” (p. 182) of stories in the oral tradition of storytelling. Mehl-Madrona believed stories have the ability to transform lives across the globe. I also believe in the healing qualities of stories as I have seen how women who have experienced male partner violence find connection and healing in sharing and hearing each

other's stories of oppression and perseverance. Xena's stories about her journeys and adventures have been helpful on my path toward healing and in the rediscovery of my self-confidence. My dedication to remaining optimistic in the face of adversity contributes to my strength and determination. I persisted even when on many occasions I confronted overwhelming challenges where I questioned my proficiency. An integral piece of my healing was participating in domestic violence psychoeducational groups. In this safe, educational, and supportive environment I listened to other women share their stories and I shared mine. Together we found healing in our common themes of a life filled with violence. I felt comforted and relieved to know that I was not at fault; as if a weight had been lifted. With knowledge I gained the power to make changes in my life to move beyond male partner violence.

By using autoethnography to share my stories in a scholarly venue I hope to further validate the significant impact of male partner violence on women, their children, and society. My thesis has the potential to create connections with women who continue to live with or who have lived with and left male partner violence. Communicating my journey of living with, leaving and moving beyond male partner violence may result in a similar healing process as occurs in psychoeducational groups. I hope that by reading my stories, health care professionals, mental health professionals, legal professionals may be able to understand and identify recipients (women and children) and perpetrators of male partner violence. This information could allow for imparting proper knowledge, expediting the process, and relevant referrals by the health care professionals, mental health professionals, and legal professionals.

My aim is to recognize how shame is the cornerstone of male partner violence. This awareness triggered an epiphany for me, I was able to identify and acknowledge shame's role and power it had in my life. Once I identified my own shame I was able to discuss how it kept

me in an unhealthy and toxic marriage. Lifting the silence around my own shame has proved useful and cathartic; I have come to understand how opening up a conversation about shame is necessary to move beyond the trauma of male partner violence. I hope to open up minds, challenge existing stereotypes that blame women, and to change societal norms around keeping the issue of male partner violence silent. Receiving validation from academia that this research is worthy of recognition marks the capstone of survivance. I dream of a future where men and women have the ability to share a healthy power.

I am damned if I do continue down this path of enlightenment, and damned if I don't continue down this path and celebrate the power that I regained.

CHAPTER 6: Honouring My Journey



Figure 8: Cherub. 1999.

Watercolour on paper. 5 x 7 (12.7 x 17.78). Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.

* * *

This simple little watercolour is significant to my journey because my creativity and spirit were both stifled during my life with Reginald. I was a shell of my former self when I left the farm, and as I began to feel whole again, my imagination re-emerged. I once again allowed myself to hope for a brighter future. Rendering this angel represents the spiritual aspect of my reawakening. I share excerpts from my personal journal during this time.

My journal dated *Saturday, April 24, 1999, 1:04 a.m.*

I've committed to taking a watercolour class. I'm excited and a little scared. I'm grateful for pushing myself to do something creative.

* * *

My journal dated *Saturday, May 8, 2:25 a.m.*

The artist phoned she is willing to take small installments for me to take her watercolour course. I was so grateful, I cried.

* * *

My journal dated *Tuesday, July 20, 1999, 2:35 a.m.*

I just finished painting a picture of an angel and I know that it's not perfect but I'm happy with it and I'm thankful I pushed myself to be creative.

* * *

Telling my story, writing, reading, and analyzing the court transcripts, journals, and artwork have been like an emotional roller coaster ride. I began careening down a stretch of painful memories, then in a split second I rose up in a spell of inspiration and enlightenment with a flash of healing, before I could catch my breath, I plunged to the depths of despair. Often, my heart feels heavy as I sense the warmth of tears trickling down my cheeks. This is when I remind myself of how far I have come and that my children are safe and healthy. But these burning questions persist: Why did it take me so long to leave? Why did I believe we could be a happy family? Why were we not enough for him? Why? Why? Why? While I have addressed these questions answering them to the best of my ability at this moment in time, I have come to accept that some of these questions are not mine to answer. I have made peace with this reality. I address the areas that are mine.

As Viktor Frankl said, "When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves." Once I grasped that Reginald was responsible for his own behaviour and feelings and I was responsible for my own, I came to accept that I couldn't change

the unhealthy abusive situation with Reginald. I could; however, change the course of my life by leaving Reginald and by taking responsibility for my own conduct in order to move beyond the abuse. I shared the dichotomies of living with and leaving male partner violence explored through my damned if I do, and damned if I don't fragments intertwined throughout my research. A précis of my research has been fashioned into a delicately detailed bricolage of all the rationales for why I stayed for so long.

My family and personal history are key factors to address these questions. My religious beliefs and values play a crucial part in untangling the knottiness of male partner violence. The current theories about why women stay in male partner violence become a sociocultural feature of my research. The socioeconomic reality of women faced with leaving the financial safety of a two-parent household is represented in this bricolage through my stories of personal experience. The sociopolitical vantage point is seen through the extensive emphasis of court transcripts and it becomes the strand that links and corroborates how all these pieces fasten together.

* * *

I am damned if I do acknowledge and embrace my imperfections, and I am damned if I don't acknowledge and embrace that I am a phenomenal woman.

* * *

I am convinced that I can encourage others through self-disclosure. I have a deep level of empathy because of my life experiences, education, and training as a counsellor. "Therapists disclose to strengthen the bond between themselves and their clients; to alleviate the sense of isolation and aloneness that most patients, indeed most people, often experience; and to offer new ways of thinking and acting" (Farber, 2006, p.139). Walker (2013) shared how he found the prudent use of emotional self-disclosure could prove to be a powerful means of healing shame

and cultivating hope. Forrest (2010) affirmed the value of self-disclosure, or genuineness, stating that it is “one of the central ingredients in effective individual psychotherapy [and] is rather strongly and consistently supported by the historic as well as latest generation of psychotherapy process-outcome research literature” (p. 37). I mentioned earlier that I have always loved to share wisdom and information with others. Although I have already been sharing with the students and women in my support groups, I would also like to share with my colleagues and others who would find this creative autoethnographic research helpful in any way.

Male partner violence does not have to be an accepted phenomenon in our society; a transformation is possible in a society that upholds equal rights for all people, including women. I view men who chose to abuse their female partners to be bullies. Women are equally deserving of dignity and respect, yet this transformation cannot begin until we reject disrespectful comments, criticism, and justifications of violence against women (Bancroft, 2002). It is possible to change a culture that passively accepts violence and oppression. Bancroft wrote: “Once we tear the cover of excuses, distortions, and manipulations off of abusers, they suddenly find abuse much harder to get away with . . . [and] we can change the culture’s attitude toward [male] partner abuse” (2002, pp. 388-399). There are no excuses for abuse.

The first step to changing society’s attitudes begins by learning to understand, appreciate, and support one another. The next step is to seek connections. We as a society continue to ask women, why do you stay in your abusive relationships? Why do you continue to return to your abusive relationships? Why don’t you just leave? Then the twist, why did you abandon your marriage? When I hear these questions, I pause. I pause because they are judgemental questions projected onto women for their excruciating predicaments. It is as meaningless as asking a “victim of food poisoning why she didn’t walk out of the restaurant that served her a dish of

tainted salmon” (Weiss, 2004, p. 8). I pause because there is no simple one sentence response to these commonly asked questions. It is more helpful to ask a woman what kept her in the marriage for so long. Society needs to begin to rephrase victim-blaming language: Switch, why does she stay? with **why does he batter?**; Switch, she provoked him with **he made a choice**; Switch, she is a battered woman with **he is an abuser**; and Switch, he has an anger control issue with **he uses abuse to have power and control over his partner** (Mid-Valley Women's Crisis Service, 2007).

The antagonism with these popular queries is women often are the ones who are expected to leave a violent intimate relationship. I recognize how resourceful women are even when they face difficulties and have experienced trauma. Women must leave their love, family, and economic security to fight for their survival, safety, children, freedom, and personal dignity. We live in a fickle society that flip-flops between judging a woman: for not being able to make her marriage work; for staying and putting up with being abused; for not protecting her children; for insisting that the children’s father see his children under unsupervised conditions; for making too big of a deal about his infidelity and/or use of profanity; his dismissive attitude toward your values and beliefs; and for making my experience of male partner violence public knowledge. Women are damned if they do and damned if they don’t.

In this thesis I address my experience of living with, returning to, leaving, and moving beyond an abusive marriage. For me the statement ‘just leave’ includes many further considerations. In a society that has a 50 % divorce rate, is it so wrong of me to strive to keep mine intact? In my personal life living without a father after the age of 12 was it so wrong for me to want my children to have a father? Is it not love to hang in there with your partner in good times and in bad? Is it wrong to accept corporal punishment in my home when as a society we

currently have spanking legislation that permits spanking children? Is it misguided to believe if I loved Reginald enough he would stop?

I did put up with violence in my marriage, and have since come to accept that I did not fail the marriage because I left or even if I had stayed. I feel compelled to include a quote by Patrick Stewart, who experienced male partner violence in his home as a young boy. While at Comicpalooza he was asked a question about his work with Amnesty International. He responded with a personal story:

As a child I heard in my home doctors and ambulance men say, Mrs. Stewart you must have done something to provoke him. Mrs. Stewart it takes two to make an argument. Wrong, wrong my mother did nothing to provoke that and even if she had violence is never ever a choice that a man should make, ever. (Comicpalooza, 2013)

There is never any justification for abuse. I have come to understand that each time Reginald chose to be violent it was his choice and his choice alone. I am responsible for the choices I can and do make in my life. I acknowledge the part societal norms play in perpetuating violence.

Disclosure becomes a political action when it grants freedom to those who suffer under the impossible weight of dominant tales (Tullis Owen et al., 2009, p.194). By sharing this “confessional moment” (hooks, 1994, p. 210) my hope is that it will elicit a positive sociocultural change concerning women who continue to live with and/or who have lived with male partner violence. I mirror Tamas’ (2011) position regarding my “implicit hope in my work is that writing is a method of survivance” (p. 262). Embracing survivance I am now an assertive woman with the power to make informed decisions and I am hopeful for the future. This research has transformed how I view myself. Although I am not the same woman I was when I met Reginald, I do not accept that I am now defective or toxic today. Poulos (2008) discovered that “the power

of the secret and that the ethical move for the researcher of human social life is to tell the story in ways that will move us toward healing” (p. 112). This has been a healing and transformative endeavour. I have much more compassion and empathy for my lived experience while continuing to accept responsibility for my own behaviour. Researching, writing, and the reiterative reality of editing have been a long-drawn-out undertaking. My desire to share the knotty affair of living with, leaving and moving beyond male partner violence using autoethnography as my research methodology is an honour. Lifting the silence to openly declare that I am a woman who has experienced male partner violence has been liberating, painful, healing, challenging, and grueling. I believe I have an important message to share and I hope that you embrace the parts of my research that resonate with you.

I now believe I can make a difference in the world, I have the ability to think critically, express my emotions appropriately, and communicate effectively. I share my experience when I determine it would be beneficial to others, I strive to be a lifelong learner, I thrive to break down societal stigma, and I continue to evolve as a woman with a positive self-image and renewed sense of self efficacy (Chamberlin & Schene, 1997). As a feminist practitioner I see my role as collaborative and as an interpersonal one. I now understand and accept how societal change materializes one person at a time.

Further research is recommended: regarding concerns of children’s best interests in cases of male partner violence, the effects on children when continuing to live with or maintain unsupervised contact with an abusive parent, and further research on same-sex intimate partner violence relationships from a personal perspective.

I created this poem to mark the turning points of my journey. My wish is that by telling my story it may offer hope. I believe one woman’s story has the power to create a ripple.

Ripple

I am a white middle class woman
My story is unique, it is my own
Scrutinizing my life is like investigating wrinkles
When did they first appear?
How did I miss the embedded implications?
I share this unconventional rhapsody
Searching for significance
Perhaps with this tiny nugget, a ripple will appear
Saskatchewan has been my only home
Beginning in a small urban setting
Moving to my generational family farm to become a wife and mother
I lost everything
I was dispossessed
One broken down car, two suitcases, and three young children
A much larger city
Starting over as a single mother living on social assistance
Healing in a second stage safe house for women
Finding subsidized housing on the right side of the river
Creatively applying for post-secondary education to live on student loans
Intimidated by the legal process, custody and division of property
Determination is my armour against fear
This is survivance as a white middle class woman
Choosing life
I seek connection to others
I want to be able to elucidate, and I want you to appreciate
This knotty affair
As I perambulate the passage of time
Reflecting the choices I faced
I feel perplexed and emotional
Why did I stay for so long?

Damned if I do . . . stay
As I continue to reflect and contemplate
I desire enlightenment
There was so much dissonance
I loved him so
I made a solemn vow
For better, for worse until death do us part?
Was I inadequate?
Was he superior?
I sallied
Hollow inside
I did not return/submit the third and final time
Damned if I don't . . . leave
Embarking on a new adventure
Living in situational poverty
With stigma and shame
A burden on society
I want my children to fathom my obligation
My love and sacrifice
Why I needed to take us all so far away
To heal, revive, and alter the future
Comfort and peace
I seek
Resonance

October 22, 1998, is the day I was confronted with the life-altering choice of staying with my husband at the risk of losing my children. When I left my husband I also left my cherished family farm, my friends and neighbours, and the lifestyle I had grown to love. On October 22, 1998 the life I had envisioned for myself died. October 23, 1998 was the birth of a new life, as a new dream emerged.

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